

# Research Paper Bachelor Thesis

## Analysing Western News

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# Framing the Juvenile Delinquent

An analysis of the types of frames appearing in Dutch crime news

## Introduction

*As innocent as a child. Young and innocent.* Both are quite common phrases in many cultures and languages which illustrate that children are often associated with innocence. The interesting question is: when does that innocence end? For some it ends really early, before they even reach adulthood, because they commit a crime. They become criminals and thus shatter this existing paradigm of innocence. Suddenly they are no longer innocent, but the exact opposite: guilty. Precisely on this topic Werner Eeman (2007), a Dutch author, wrote a book titled as *Jong maar niet onschuldig* (young but not innocent) in which he discusses teenagers who committed murders. The title explains the society's problem with judging underage criminals: they are young, and therefore associated with innocence, but they commit a crime, which takes away that innocence with which they are associated. This may place journalists reporting on crimes committed by minors in a difficult position. How can they report on a fifteen-year-old boy who killed someone? How guilty is this teenager? Was it not his fault but was he made into a killer, so is he in a sense still innocent? Or should he be treated like an adult criminal? Is he the personification of evil, a murderous teenager? In order to find out if journalists write differently when they are reporting on underage criminals as opposed to the writing style they use when reporting on adult criminals, this study aims to investigate news articles discussing underage criminals and to analyse whether there is a difference between the used frames in articles on young criminals and the used frames in articles on the Dutch news.

In this investigation of news articles, the word *framing* is crucial. Other than fixing a picture inside a frame, framing is also defined as expressing something while choosing one's words with care (Cambridge Dictionary, 2010) and making someone innocent appear guilty by creating false evidence (Oxford Dictionary, 2016). Even though these definitions seem very different, they have something interesting in common: they both appear to be intending to *influence* and *manipulate* the objective reality in order to generate a beneficial outcome. Although it might seem rather obvious that it can be important to choose one's words with care, one might not always realize that authors of written texts very often have to choose their words

carefully. It is likely that a reader, especially of non-fictional texts like newspapers, assumes that a newspaper offers information from an objective point of view on a set of recent issues, events or problems. However, journalists use frames, consciously or unconsciously, to influence the opinion of the readers on a certain topic (Dahl, 2015; Entman, 1993). Many investigators have written definitions of framing, but the generally accepted and used definition of framing was developed by Entman (1993): *“Framing essentially involves selection and salience. 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”* (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

Framing thus means that the objective truth is manipulated by the writer by means of selecting and emphasizing certain aspects of the facts, and in this way making these aspects more prominent in the text (Entman, 1993). The location of the frame in the text is not a specific pre-determined spot. However, headlines, leads, and quotations from sources and witnesses are locations where one is very likely to find frames in the text (Dahl, 2015). Sources’ statements seem an unlikely location for framing because sources are generally used by journalists in order to maintain their objectivity. On the other hand, sources and witnesses can also be used to say what a journalist him- or herself cannot (Dahl, 2015).

It is important to realize that framing is not static but should rather be seen as a process (De Vreese, 2005). Adding a frame to a text is not always consciously done by the journalist (Dahl, 2015; Entman, 1993) and it is a process that has multiple steps (De Vreese, 2005). It was found that there are different stages in the development of frames: “frame-building, frame-setting and individual and societal level consequences of framing” (De Vreese, 2005, p. 52). Frame-building is considered to be the process in which both internal and external factors influence journalists and thus determine the construction of the frames in the news articles. The next phase, frame-setting, focusses more on the interaction between the frame as it was used in the media and the receiver. It is also the stage in which the frame has the possibility to influence the receiver. The actual effect of the frame is visible in the last phase of the process, the consequences phase. These consequences can be both individual, such as a slightly adjusted attitude towards a certain topic, and societal, such as influencing the process of making an important decision (De Vreese, 2005).

Frames have a big influence on a readers' thoughts of a certain topic and that in some cases it might also influence the extent to which a reader can recall the (information in the) article (Valkenburg, Semetko & De Vreese, 1999). This means that by using a certain frame in a text, either consciously or unconsciously, a journalist has an influence on a reader's opinion on a certain topic. Another article by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), based on a study by Neuman, Just and Crigler (1992), provides a set of essential building blocks for this investigation. Five general frames that were identified by Neuman, Just and Crigler (1992), which cover the majority of the frames that were previously identified by other researchers, were used by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) to distinguish five types of frames that can occur in news articles:

- The conflict frame: the core of this frame is to emphasize conflict, between certain individuals, groups or institutions with the aim of attracting the attention of the audience.
- The human interest frame: in this type of frame, the human or emotional aspect of a problem, an event or an issue is emphasized. In this way, news can become more personal, more dramatic or more emotional and in such it might be easier to attract and hold the attention of the reader.
- The economic consequences frame: this frame has the focus on the economic consequences an issue, event or problem might cause for an individual, group, institution, region or country and it has been identified as a common frame in the news.
- The morality frame: in this frame, the emphasis of the writer is on placing an issue, event or problem in the context of moral or religious principles. Because this is a frame that is rather easy to notice, especially if religion is involved, journalists tend to use an external source for constructing this frame, in order to maintain their professional objectivity.
- The attribution of responsibility frame: in this frame, journalists present an issue, event or problem in a certain way so the reader comes to understand who is responsible for either the cause or the solution of this. Journalists can hold an individual, group, institution or the government responsible for the causes or solutions of these issues, events or problems.

In order to investigate these frames in texts, a list of "yes-or-no" questions was constructed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), which they used in their corpus analysis of Dutch newspaper articles and television news. They found that in general, the attribution of

responsibility frame was most common, followed by respectively the conflict frame, the economic consequences frame, the human interest frame and the morality frame. However, in articles on the topic of crime, the human interest frame was most common.

In this study the method developed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) will be followed since it is relatively simple to use their methods and findings, albeit with some slight adjustments. This study focuses on framing on the topic of crime in written news articles (published both on- and offline), and within that topic, focuses on the differences between types of frames that are found in articles on underage criminals and the types of frames that are found in articles on adult criminals.

This leads to the following research question:

In which way do the frames in articles on crime news on underage criminals differ from the frames in articles on adult criminals in Dutch national newspapers?

In order to help answer this question, two sub-questions will have to be answered as well:

1. Which frames are most common in crime news on underage criminals?
2. Which frames are most common in crime news on adult criminals?

The connection between “children” and “innocence” is expected to be so fixed in the society that journalists let it influence them while writing their articles, which will likely show in the type of frame used in the news article. This almost desperate belief in the underage perpetrator’s innocence could cause the journalist not to place the guilt and blame for what happened on the juvenile criminal him- or herself, but on an external factor such as the government, a certain individual or a group. Therefore, hypothesis 1 is: In the news articles on underage criminals the attribution of responsibility frame will appear most often.

For articles on adult criminals the article by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) provides reason to expect that the human interest frame will be found most often. In their study they found that this specific frame was most common in crime news, so this makes hypothesis 2: In news articles on adult criminals the human interest frame will appear most often.

In this way, this study continues the investigation of Neuman et al. (1992) and Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), but in a more specified way, by applying their framework in order to analyse the framing of a specific group in Dutch newspapers.

## Method

### *Material*

In order to carry out this investigation, a corpus was constructed of a total of 60 news articles. All these articles were written by Dutch journalists and published in one of the four most read Dutch national newspapers, which were the *Algemeen Dagblad (AD)*, the *Telegraaf*, the *Volkscrant* and the *NRC* (RTL Nieuws, 2014). One half of the articles discussed underage criminals and the other half discussed adult criminals. The articles in the corpus were published between 2012 and 2016, in both the print and the online version of the mentioned newspapers. The articles were selected using certain keywords, such as: *misbruik* (abuse), *kindermisbruik* (child abuse), *moord* (murder), *minderjarig* (underage) or *verkrachting* (rape). The articles had to clearly state whether the perpetrator was older or younger than eighteen, which resulted in classifying them as respectively adult or underage. The crimes on which the articles reported were divided into four categories: child abuse, murder, rape and crime. The category crime was used in case the article could not be placed in any of the other three, so for instance a news article on theft.

The *Telegraaf* was the most read newspaper in The Netherlands, and although it was viewed as a sensationalist newspaper, it also contained more in-depth articles as well as financial news. In that sense, it could not really be compared to any other Dutch or foreign newspaper (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; TMG, 2016). The *AD* was not as sensationalist as the *Telegraaf*, but it was also not as serious as the *Volkscrant* or the *NRC*, so the *AD* was somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. Both the *Volkscrant* and the *NRC* were serious and sober newspapers, that did not contain sensationalist stories (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). The news articles in the corpus had an average length of 160.95 words ( $SD = 73.3$ ). Tables with distributions of the news articles in the categories and the newspapers (table 1), distribution of the articles on underage criminals (table 2) and distribution of the articles on adult criminals (table 3) can be found in appendix 1.

### *Procedure*

All the articles in the corpus were analysed using a list of twenty questions that had been designed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) and for this investigation another question was added for the attribution of responsibility frame: Does the story suggest that an individual or group other than the perpetrator(s) hold(s) (partial) responsibility for the issue/problem? This was done because there was need for a question that could specifically measure if someone

other than the perpetrator was responsible for the crime as well. These questions were used as a test to see whether one or more of the five frame types appeared in the article and which frames were found most often in articles on underage criminals and which frames appeared with the highest frequency in articles on adult criminals. There were six questions that measured the presence of the attribution of responsibility frame, five that measured the presence of the human interest frame, four on the conflict frame, three on the morality frame and three on the economic consequences frame. Each of these questions could be answered with either *yes* (1) or *no* (0). Per frame a minimum of fifty percent of the questions had to be answered with *yes* in order to prove the presence of the frame. Ten articles (five on underage criminals and five on adult criminals) were coded by two coders in order to calculate the intercoder reliability. The entire list of questions can be found in appendix 2.

### *Statistical analysis*

After measuring the frequency with which the five types of frames appeared in the articles, a quantitative analysis in the form of a chi-square test was used to determine whether there was a relation between the variable “type of criminal” (adult or underage) and the variable “type of frame” (human interest, conflict, economic consequences, morality, attribution of responsibility) that was found in the article. The intercoder reliability for the variables “frame\_score\_coder\_1” and “frame\_score\_coder\_2” was insufficient:  $\kappa = .29, p < .001$ . The intercode reliability for the variables “frame\_score\_coder\_1” and “frame\_score\_final” was good:  $\kappa = .87, p < .001$ .

## Results

A  $\chi^2$ - test of the variables “type of criminal” and “type of frame” showed that there was no significant relation between the two variables: ( $\chi^2 (4) = 6.89, p = .142$ ). However, since the difference in number of “human interest” frames did seem to be rather large, as was expected in hypothesis 2 another  $\chi^2$ - test of the variables “type of criminal” and “type of frame” was conducted, only the codes were slightly adjusted to focus on the specific frame. Instead of having codes 1, 2, 3 and 4 for respectively the attribution of responsibility, human interest, conflict, and morality frames, and a 0 for the articles in which no frame was found, only three codes were used: 0 (no frame), 1 (other type of frame), and 2 (human interest frame). This  $\chi^2$ - test showed a significant difference between the variables “type of criminal” and the variable “type of frame”: ( $\chi^2 (2) = 6.61, p = .037$ ). For the frame “attribution of responsibility” no difference in appearance frequency was found, since in both the corpus for underage criminals and the corpus for adult criminals, this frame was found four times. The question that was added to the list designed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), *does the story suggest that an individual or group other than the perpetrator(s) hold(s) (partial) responsibility for the issue/problem?*, also did not show a difference between the articles on underage and adult criminals, since the question was answered with “yes” five times in the underage criminal corpus and four times in the adult criminal corpus.

An independent sample t-test showed that there was a significant difference in the average number of words for the two corpuses ( $t (46,34) = 2.42, p = .020$ ). Since the Levene’s test was significant ( $p = .020$ ), equal variances were not assumed. The average number of words in the corpus of articles on underage criminals ( $M = 138.90, SD = 49.91$ ) was significantly lower than the average number of words in the corpus of adult criminals ( $M = 183.00, SD = 86.63$ ).

## Conclusion

In order to answer the main research question (*In which way do the frames in articles on crime news on underage criminals differ from the frames in articles on adult criminals in Dutch national newspapers?*), and to find out whether the hypotheses can be confirmed, two sub-questions (sub-question1: *Which frames are most common in crime news on underage criminals?* Sub-question 2: *Which frames are most common in crime news on adult criminals?*) were answered first. In the complete corpus of 60 news articles there were 21 articles in which no frame could be identified. The answer to the first sub-question (*which frames are most common in crime news on underage criminals*) in terms of frequency, is the human interest frame although this result is not significant. In hypothesis 1, the expectation was that in articles on underage criminals the attribution of responsibility frame would appear most often, but the data does not provide significant support for this hypothesis. Therefore, hypothesis 1 is rejected. Hypothesis 2 (in articles on adult criminals the human interest frame will appear most often), however, is accepted. This frame appeared significantly more in the corpus of articles on adult criminals than in the corpus of articles on underage criminals. What was unexpected, was that in 14 articles on underage criminals no frame could be identified. This number was twice as high as the number of articles in the adult criminal corpus in which no frame was found. However, this was a non-significant result. All the frequencies with which the frames appeared in the corpus can be seen in table 4. The total number of frames is higher than the number of articles in the corpus, this is because some articles contained more than one frame.

Table 4. Frequency of the appearances of the frames

Type of frame	Underage criminal	Adult criminal	Total corpus
No frame	14	7	21
Attribution of Responsibility frame	4	4	8
Human Interest frame	8	19	27
Conflict frame	4	3	7
Morality frame	3	4	7
Economic Consequences frame	0	0	0
Total	33	37	70

This means that the main research question can be partially answered. The corpus of articles on adult criminals contained significantly more Human Interest frames than the corpus of articles on underage criminals, which was the only difference that was found.

## **Discussion**

The confirmation of hypothesis 2 was to be expected because Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) already found in their investigation that the Human Interest frame is the most common frame in crime articles. This frame was also the most common in the corpus on underage criminals, although this could not be supported with statistics. A possible explanation for the big number of articles in the underage criminal corpus in which no frame could be identified has to do with the criminals being underage. This means that even though they are criminals, they still have a certain right to be protected in the media. Less details about these teenagers are given to the media, so there is less information to be framed. Another reason could be that for underage criminals the media put more effort in checking the facts, and therefore they stick more to those facts.

There is also a possibility that there were many articles without a frame because many articles were relatively short. The articles had an average length of 160.95 words ( $SD = 73.3$ ), and this is not very long. In addition, a t-test showed that the means of the corpora were significantly different, so it is quite likely that there is a relation between the length of the article and the appearance of frames and it is possible that the articles in the corpus were too short to adequately show frames.

The size of the corpus was a rather big limitation in this investigation. It proved to be difficult to acquire sufficient articles for the corpus on underage criminals so in a next investigation it would be necessary to repeat this study but to extend the size of the corpus, maybe by collecting articles over a bigger period of time. In addition, all the articles for the adult criminal corpus were published during 2013 and 2014 and the corpus of underage criminal articles included some articles that were published before 2013 or after 2014, which could have interfered with the homogeneity of the corpora.

In a next study the influence of the number of words might be investigated, because it seems rather likely that the number of words can influence the presence of a frame. As mentioned before, a next study should also use a bigger corpus and perhaps a method of analysing other than the one Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) developed could be used to compare the two methods.

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## Appendix 1

### Distribution of the articles in the corpus

*Table 1: distribution of the news articles in the categories and the newspapers*

	Child Abuse	Murder	Rape	Crime	Total
AD	5	1	4	3	13
Telegraaf	5	3	4	6	18
Volkskrant	4	3	4	7	18
NRC	3	2	0	6	11
Total	17	9	12	22	60

*Table 2: distribution of the news articles on underage criminals*

	Child Abuse	Murder	Rape	Crime	Total
AD	2	0	1	3	6
Telegraaf	2	0	0	4	6
Volkskrant	1	2	3	5	11
NRC	0	1	0	6	7
Total	5	3	4	18	30

*Table 3: distribution of the news articles on adult criminals*

	Child Abuse	Murder	Rape	Crime	Total
AD	3	1	3	0	7
Telegraaf	3	3	4	2	12
Volkskrant	3	1	1	2	7
NRC	3	1	0	0	4
Total	12	6	8	4	30

## **Appendix 2**

The twenty questions designed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000)

Attribution of responsibility:

1. Does the story suggest that some level of government has the ability to alleviate the problem?
2. Does the story suggest that some level of the government is responsible for the issue/problem?
3. Does the story suggest solutions to the problem/issue?
4. Does the story suggest that an individual or group of people in society is responsible for the issue/problem?
5. Does the story suggest that an individual or group other than the perpetrator(s) hold(s) (partial) responsibility for the issue/problem?
6. Does the story suggest the problem requires urgent action?

Human interest frame:

7. Does the story provide a human example or human face on the issue?
8. Does the story employ adjectives or personal vignettes that generate feelings of outrage, empathy-caring, sympathy or compassion?
9. Does the story emphasize how individuals and groups are affected by the issue/problem?
10. Does the story go into the private or personal lives of the actors?
11. Does the story contain visual information that might generate feelings of outrage, empathy-caring, sympathy, or compassion?

Conflict frame:

12. Does the story reflect disagreement between parties-individuals-groups-countries?
13. Does one party-individual-group-country reproach another?
14. Does the story refer to two sides or to more than two sides of the problem or issue?
15. Does the story refer to winners and losers?

Morality frame:

16. Does the story contain any moral message?
17. Does the story make reference to morality, God, and other religious tenets?
18. Does the story offer specific social prescriptions about how to behave?

Economic frame:

19. Is there a mention of financial losses or gains now or in the future?
20. Is there a mention of the costs/degree of expense involved?
21. Is there a reference to economic consequences of pursuing a course of action?