

# Reporting on the ‘ever closer union’: narrative framing in national news medias and resistance to EU integration

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## Abstract

*The implementation of the EU’s integrative policies has resulted in relatively recent resistance to the integration process. Said popular politicization challenges further prospects for integration as it brings layers of identities to clash. A national identity persists within Member States, which views that boundaries should rest on the state level. This conflicts with the supranational identity implied by EU integration as it often necessitates the removal of national barriers. It is argued that this clash becomes activated through the manner in which news is reported in national medias. From this, a model is unpacked, positing the employment of narrative formats that frame events and issues with European aspects in national terms. Thus, media portrays national identity as conflicting legitimately with supranational integration, suggesting resistance to the EU project as the appropriate stance if the clash is to be resolved. Finally, possible application of the model is discussed.*

**Keywords:** discourse, EU integration, identity conception, issue creation, news framing

## 1. Introduction

For most of the past four centuries Europe has existed as a grouping of Westphalian nation-states. Yet, over the past 60 years the rise of supranational integration in the form of the European Economic Community and later the European Union has called into question the exclusivity of the nation-state as the prime level of identity conception and related demarcation of economic and political barriers. As supranational integration measures became implemented over time, especially towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, public resistance towards the EU project on the national level has

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become more pronounced.<sup>1</sup> Such increased national politicization of European issues places policymakers in an environment of increasing ‘constraining dissensus’ flowing from the fact that “The jurisdictional shape of Europe has been transformed, but the way in which citizens conceive their identities has not”, thus standing to hinder further prospects for integration (Hooghe and Marks, 2009, p. 12). This clash of a supranational identity implicit in the integration process and persistent national identity conceptions of Member State citizens represents new a challenge to EU integration, the rise of which bears further investigation. Within this phenomenon, the concurrence of nationally oriented, identity-based reporting in Member State news outlets with regard to the perceived consequences of integration and popular resistance to the EU has been documented (De Wilde and Zurn, 2012; Heikkila and Kunelius, 2014). Yet, hypotheses regarding the exact manner in which news media reports themselves serve to contribute toward resistance to the EU remain relatively unpacked. In context of the EU’s multiple levels of governance, how has this conflict between levels of identity conception become activated within EU Member State publics through the conduit of national news medias?

## **2. The Europeanization of issues in national institutions and spheres of discourse**

As previous scholarly investigation has shown, a viable public sphere increases the legitimacy of institutions by serving to hold actors within them accountable (De Vreese, 2007). However, in EU Member States, European political developments continue to be conceived of in such a manner that “most of the news [regarding it] is seen through the prism of the nation” (p. 10). Indeed, Schmidt appears to agree with this position. She goes on to situate the role of the media within the perpetuation of state-based identity conceptions of legitimate governance: “The lack of a common European language, a European media or a European public opinion ensures that the communicative discourse comes largely by way of national political actors speaking to national publics in national languages reported by national media and considered by national opinion” (Schmidt, 2013, p.13). Within the context of national identity, the tendency of journalists to frame issues by focusing on conflict which they believe may impact on public moral values could cause media to “influence the direction of audiences’ thoughts when conceiving of a contemporary issue”, thus building it into a political crisis (De Vreese, 2005). Indeed, this means that journalism has long played a decisive role in “the battle of ideas with regard to the policy questions of the day” necessarily including those related to EU integration (Schmidt, 2008, p. 305).

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<sup>1</sup> While various typologies related to dissatisfaction regarding the European project have been developed, ‘resistance to EU integration’ can be used as a concept encompassing of those typologies. See Crespy and Verschueren (2009) for a further discussion.

The institution of discourse regarding the evolution of a certain topic includes not only ideas themselves, but also how and by whom they are expressed for a reason at a certain point in time. News media provide a conduit through which such discourse can be communicated to national publics and whereby the response can serve to constrain further policy making regarding integration (Koopmans and Statham, 2010, p. 4). While this would provide some role for the media in activating resistance to the EU, the specific ways in which it brings EU and national identities into conflict have received less attention. In what follows, an explanatory hypothesis is elaborated for theorizing narrative framing by national news medias of visible events that are viewed as illegitimate by national conceptions of normalcy. In this way, media narrative can be understood as the issue-creating space through which resistance to integration is sparked by bringing national identities and the supranational one implied by EU integration to clash.

### **3. The 'Five W's and an H': a role for the news media within public discourse.**

The positioning of news outlets within the public discourse has developed as the media “frames, shapes and packages information and in this function exerts a large and sometimes determinate influence in shaping citizens opinions” (Chambers, 2009, p. 341). This role is reflected in one of the most basic tenets of journalistic storytelling: “news reports cover concrete newsworthy events—arbitrarily chunked concretes in a continuous flow of history [and therefore have] a defined structure [consisting] of the familiar five W's and one H... who, what, when, where, why and how” as the seminal types of information that a journalist is expected to report regarding an event (Pan and Kosicki, 1993, p. 60). Thus, through reporting certain events in discourse, journalists serve to frame a given debate within the public sphere by defining a situation, its relevant issues and the terms of debate (Scheufele, 1999; Tankard, 2001, p. 96). Journalists in Europe are themselves members of national societies and conceive their identities and roles in largely national terms (Heikkila and Kunelius, 2014). Thus, the implicit presence of national level solidarity ideals in their reporting serves to influence their attribution of newsworthy salience of events and statements within the discursive elements of the ‘five W's and an H’ storytelling components:

#### **3.1. What to report and Why – national identity conception in assessing event newsworthiness**

Immediately obvious in the above statements is the question of what a journalist will consider as a 'newsworthy' event. It is intuitive that events which are perceived to be of more relevance to public audiences will be considered more salient as it will make them more likely to consume news product (Van Dijk, 1988, p. 86). However, the mindsets of journalists are also of relevance when it comes to the selection of news stories, making news “more than an economic product, but a

professional, political, and cultural product. Economic imperatives are an essential but insufficient explanation for what gets produced as 'news'" (Lawrence, 2006, p. 226).

Thus, it becomes apparent that normative ideals influence the focus of narrative formats regarding the perception of the nature of an event and why it may be worth reporting (Scheufele, 1999). Secondary to this flow are factors such as political leanings of news organizations with the input from the external or expert sources selected by the journalist playing only a tertiary role. These normative ideals are determined in large part from the fact that journalists are themselves part of the audience for news and thus are influenced by the publicity of events from other outlets as well as by communities of which they are a part. The embedded nature of journalism within public spheres could cause reporters to reinforce national identity conceptions by their selection of stories that they perceive to threaten national identity and therefore constitute a newsworthy crisis (Donsbach, 2004). As integration often requires the lifting of national barriers and protections, the above provides a means by which some aspects of integration could become politicized through publicization in national public spheres. But, it does not address why issues relating to integration became politicized only years after the European project began.

### **3.2. When an issue is reported and How - national identity and the illegitimizing of events**

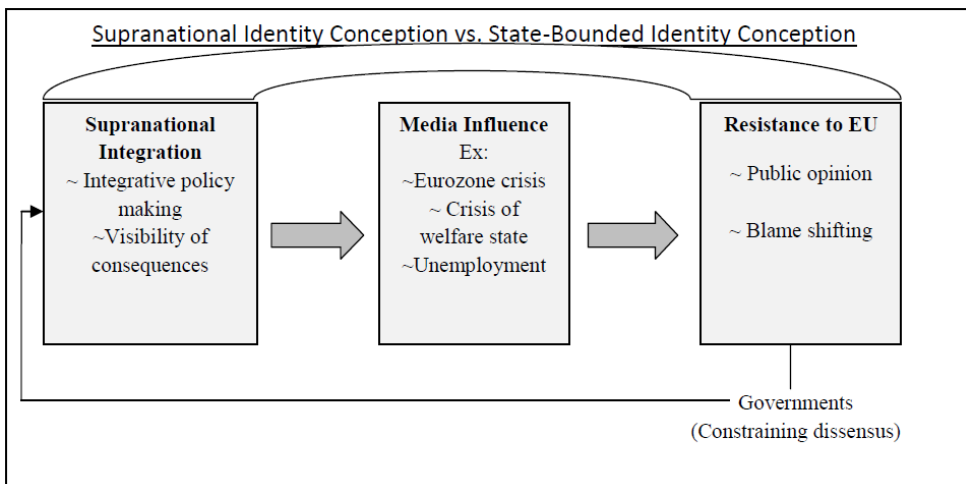
As journalists are members of national societies, the role of their identities and ideologies may explain why given events are more likely to be reported at certain points in time while others are not with regard to the EU integration process as "Unpublicized, the views could gain few adherents and generate little perceived or actual effect on public opinion" (Entman, 1993, p.55). Indeed, events, or anticipated events, which immediately conflict with the audience's conceptions of the world with which they interact and are perceived by journalists as a crisis leading to conflict that is in need of resolution, are more likely to be selected as newsworthy at that point in time (Van Dijk, 1988, p.86). Other events which may have greater significant impact on a given issue but do not meet the above criteria, such as highly technical and procedural policy making in the Commission, are less likely to be considered to be relevant if they do not immediately break accepted norms which affect the audience and thereby, do not constitute a relevant 'crisis-juncture' that leads to evident legitimacy conflict in terms of journalistic storytelling narrative (Gans, 2007). It is thus not simply the information about an event that carries effect but also "the fact that the issue has received a certain amount of processing time and attention" in the news (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007, p. 14). With respect to the growth in scope of EU integration, this may mean that the media do not focus on the more esoteric aspects of the integration process with regard to their actual effects and implications. Instead, they focus on perceived visible consequences of integration as clashing

with national public identities and the removal of national barriers made necessary by integration, such that the latter is portrayed as a threat.

### 3.3. 'Where' an event occurs and 'Who' is responsible: identity conceptions and national focus

Which actors are considered to be of relevance when reporting a story is also an aspect of whether national or supranational context is considered as more important. Through the tendency of journalists to frame events they unknowingly "define the terms of a debate without the audience realizing it is taking place" (Tankard, 2001, p. 97). With regard to European integration, the source of visible crisis tends to rest on the implementation of EU regulation on the national level and its perceived consequences to the extent that it is analysed as a 'European' issue (Bijmans and Altides, 2007) (figure 1).

**Figure 1. Development of resistance to integration through media reporting**



Source: author's representation

Thus, it would appear that national news media are inclined to frame events as occurring in a Member State, rather than unfolding in 'Europe'. Due to this focus regarding the primacy of national governance with regard to EU policy, it may cause journalists to focus on national leaders when reporting information through framing them as having ultimate responsibility for resolving the perceived consequences of EU-originated policy (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000). Such lack of focus on supranational level actors means that national actors have greater opportunity to shift blame for policies to the supranational level when communicating to publics through the media, serving to reinforce the conflict between supranational and national identities (Schmidt, 2013).

#### **4. Crisis, conflict and ‘resolution’: journalistic storytelling and the creation of issues**

So far, journalists’ emphasis of crisis in selecting individual news stories has been mentioned. Yet, the narrative formatting of framing in news according to the prism of the nation-state has both micro and macro aspects (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007). Through the consistent framing of individual news items in national terms on the micro level of individual news stories according to a crisis-conflict-resolution narrative format, news outlets also have the ability to not only define how publics frame and conceive the shape of larger issues related to EU integration, but also prime audience members to adopt certain attitudes toward a given actor’s responsibility for causing and/or resolving a problem.

##### **4.1. The crisis – from beginning a story to constructing an ongoing issue**

In order for a news story to have a narrative drive instead of simply representing an eclectic assembly of facts, it obviously must have a beginning, middle and end. As such, the news media acts not only as a source of information but also as “the principal weaver of life-narratives and storyteller of the human condition, [which] supplies the cognitive frames and patterns with which ... the acutely felt torments of existential insecurity are comprehended” (Bauman, 2002, p. 59). In fulfilling this role, the crisis element of news storytelling can be understood as a report’s setting out to position a certain event as causing a problem that audiences can recognize easily and will find relevant (Althiede, 1997). These problems often become of salience as the concrete events that represent them disagree with a national society’s normative conceptions and thus become personally ‘alarming’ - or crisis-oriented - in nature within the news narrative (Innes, 2004).

Reporting events as crisis-problems can also have wider implications than merely shaping public perceptions or debates regarding a single event. The continual reporting of crisis-oriented events on seemingly related subjects has the power to frame or even create a certain issue within society as problematic. Such signals in reports perform a broader “‘framing’ function for individuals in terms of how they interpret and define their co-present encounters and experiences” (Innes, 2004, p. 351). As a result, events reported as relating to the broader subject of integration in the EU can be understood in news reports as causing problems and consequently acting as crises which lead to their conversion into a topical issue about which more information is well received by audiences for its reduction of uncertainty about said topic. Because news-workers know that audiences find certain issue narratives more salient, this leads them to portray broad issues related to integration, such as perceived consequences of free movement, as being ‘continual crises’ through the continued reporting of crisis-events related to them (Bauman, 2002). Doing so reinforces national conceptions of the normalcy of state-based identity and therefore which series of events are representative of

issues that are considered 'problematic' or 'deviant' and may even constitute a 'moral panic' (Altheide, 2002, p. 60). When connected with the possibility for journalists, as members of national societies themselves, to report news stories in terms of primarily nationally defined storytelling components of the five W and an H, a connection to resistance to EU integration is revealed. Those exposed to news on a certain dimension of governance can be primed to judge an actor's effectiveness based on the criteria of that issue (Chong and Druckman, 2007). If reports reference events related to EU integration as causing salient problems for national politics or economies, it would lend credence to the proposition that said reports prime national publics to regard consequences of integration as resultant from issue-crises caused by the EU institutions, while still remaining uncertain about the solution.

#### **4.2. The conflict – from driving the narrative of an event to defining the issue**

Many typologies of frames have been developed as related to various subjects or topics on which the media regularly produces reports (De Vreese, 2005). With relation to the crisis-conflict-resolution storytelling format, news media tends to frame most-all stories in thematically "episodic" terms, meaning that each story would require formatting some form of the three elements of said storytelling structure in order for it to constitute an episodic narrative (Iyengar, 1991, p. 3). With specific regard to elements of a story that constitute conflict, it is important to define further what is meant by the term here. Others have used 'conflict' in different ways when discussing news framing. For instance, according to Semetko and Valkenberg's (2000) typology, conflict is mentioned as only one of five possible frames. However, the meaning of conflict within said typology is confined to constituting only "Conflict between individuals, groups or institutions" (Semetko and Valkenberg's, 2000, p. 95). Neuman (1992) typology also includes concrete conflict only as one of five possible frames. Yet, the term can be used in a much more encompassing sense as an element of story formatting. If conflict is understood as narrative opposition between entities or outcomes which represent normative societal conceptions regarding a subject and an aberration from that norm, it becomes clear that conflict must be inherent all other topical frames. This is because "the received definition of good journalistic practice ... emphasizes telling 'both sides of the story' and the impulse to put together an interesting narrative, if possible with good guys and bad guys, leads to a heavy media emphasis on forces in conflict" (Neuman et al., 1992, pp. 64-66). Even when 'good' or 'bad' people or actors are not explicitly involved in a story, some narrative element of discord or contested outcome still remains no matter the topical frame or technical structuring of a news report; otherwise, the report would lack coherence (Johnson-Cartee, 2005, p. 159). Indeed, while speaking of both frames of 'conflict' and 'economic consequences' De Vreese (2005, pp. 58-59) notes the "universal nature of the conflict frame" as part of a

narrative format as opposed to a topical frame. When the ‘consequences frame’ was used, journalists focused on the clashing expectations or interpretations of what exactly the consequences may be in terms of narrative structure.

In a similar manner to how continued reporting of crisis-events can build into the creation of a crisis-issue, understanding that issue in terms of the groups or outcomes which create the resultant conflict serves to define and replicate the debate through determining which sides it has and what side of the debate the conflicting stakeholders are on (Miller and Reichert, 2001, pp. 111-112). This does not belie the fact that certain stakeholder groups are more successful in defining this conflict-oriented media narrative to their advantage through drawing attention to certain events. Still, it remains that a topical issue will be defined by the media in terms of conflict between two or more sides over many related events (Miller and Riechert, 2000, pp. 49-50). With regard to EU integration, if the conflict is reported as occurring between national barriers and the EU lifting of them, this may prime news consumers to view the crisis-issues of integration not only as caused in some form by the EU institutions, but also as resulting in a conflict over the ‘boundaries’ of society between the EU ‘deviant’ identity and the ‘normal’ national one (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 2009, p. 29). The tendency of news to be reported in phases of deviation from normalcy, investigation of how the deviation occurred/is occurring and finally a return to equilibrium leads, in the public discourse, to perpetuation of “naïve beliefs and provide[s] assurance that elites can be trusted” with regard to their public statements (Vincent et al. in Miller and Riechert, 2000, pp. 48-49). As such, the use of the conflict-oriented narrative format may contribute to the creation of ‘moral panics’ over a variety of subjects related to integration that only reinforce national conceptions of normalcy as an issue moves toward resolution (Pijpers, 2006).

#### **4.3. The ‘Resolution’ – from ending to a report to suggesting a stance on the issue**

All individual news stories require a conclusion for reasons of narrative cogency (Ekstrom, 2000). As a result, reports address the manner in which a conflict was resolved or the possible next steps of its evolution in the future. In some situations, such as news relating to street crime, the resolution is often a concrete elimination of conflict. However, when applied to political or regulatory stories, which tend to occur over longer time periods than one daily news reporting cycle, a concrete resolution to an event is often absent and consequently substituted in reporting with what will need to happen in the future if conflict resultant from crisis is to be ended (Schudson, 1989). The assignment of blame and responsibility is closely connected with the above point. News stories not only define the actors responsible for causing individual crisis-problems; they also look toward the future resolution of issues created by the accumulation of related events by making judgments about which actors have “the power to alleviate or (forestall alleviation of) the problem” (Iyengar, 1991, p. 8). Thus, news narrative takes on



an implicit ideological component that is influenced by the national identity conceptions of journalists.

This ongoing need of issue resolution over multiple individual stories helps to not only create and define the larger issues and the debates surrounding them. It also influences and even reinforces the conceptions and opinions of national audiences. In light of media's aforementioned propensity to prolong situations of crisis, their concurrent tendency to create resolution may appear paradoxical. The cumulative portrayal of events as characterized by ongoing conflict leads to the creation and sustainment of issues. Yet, in a similar vein, the cumulative reporting of a need for resolution of events and resultantly the issues of which those events have become a part due to certain responsible actors can prime audiences into adopting certain issue-positions about how the conflict should be resolved. Said tendency flows from reports' "narrative form that draws attention both to the reason for the original problem and the subject position that reasonably minded members of the audience should adopt if they are to help enforce the necessary solution" (Watson, 2009, p. 428). By understanding the presence of the resolution element in journalistic narrative as more than just the concrete end to an event, it is possible to see how the crisis-conflict-resolution format simultaneously paints integration-related issues as being ones of crises that, if not resolved, are by definition *in need of* resolution through the adoption of certain anti-EU stances. In this way, resolution is understood providing episodic narrative closure, while acknowledging the continuance of clashing, deviant, positions.

## **5. Conclusion: towards the consolidation of an analytical framework**

The use of the crisis-conflict-resolution storytelling format on the level of individual news events can be transmuted into the activation of the clash of identities between the EU and national levels with regard to the lifting of barriers implied by supranational integration. As has been argued, this can occur in any one of three ideational realms, each, in the form of a narrative, building on the other. Nationally oriented narrative reporting in terms of the five W's and an H story components may lead national audiences to view events related to integration as a part of a crisis caused by the EU. This crisis can become linked within the narrative as leading to conflict with the integrative policies of those institutions. Most seriously, news stories may prime audiences into regarding the EU negatively as the 'appropriate stance' if the 'problem' of integration is to be resolved.

Through taking the framing of events related to integration in news reporting as an intervening variable, between continuing EU integration and resistance to said phenomena, it is possible to cull six ways in which national medias can serve to accentuate the existence of an identity clash between levels of governance in the EU: 1) By selecting visible (if not significant) consequences

of integration as newsworthy crisis-events (What). 2) By presenting EU integration as violating national normative ideals of national barrier entrenchment, causing crisis in terms of the crisis-conflict-resolution storytelling format (Why). 3) By reporting on integration related topics in at points in time when the national/supranational identity conflict would be particularly evident (When). 4) By explaining the manner in which conflict over lifting of national barriers occurs through the prism of the legitimacy of state-based, boundary-oriented exclusion (How). 5) By framing ‘European’ events as occurring primarily within and having consequences for the nation-state (Where). 6) By framing national actors and/or citizens as the most relevant identity-sources of information regarding developments toward resolution in topics regarding integration despite its European element (Who). Parceling out journalistic narrative frames in this way should allow for possible illumination of which aspects of them are most prominent in activating resistance through identity conflict (Table 1):

**Table 1. Structuring EU integration according to news storytelling formats**

Crisis (EU integration) →		Conflict (Identity clash) →		Resolution (Resistance to EU)	
What?	Why?	When?	How?	Where?	Who?
Does the story refer to integration or an issue related to it?	Is the EU/integration presented as negatively related to the crisis-juncture?	Is the story contextualized as occurring when discord between national and EU levels is evident?	Is an issue related to implementation of integrative policy portrayed as causing conflict?	Is the event occurring within the nation-state, or does it have wider ‘European’ implications?	Are actors responsible for causing/resolving the conflict portrayed as national, or is there a ‘European’ side of the story?
Y/N(if yes →)	Y/N	Y/N	Y/N	Y/N	Y/N

Source: author’s representation

As a result of these six elements, journalistic accounts stand to under-represent the EU side of the story within the public discourse, thereby leading to the activation of public resistance to the EU project. As actual pressures for integration remain high (Fligstein, Polyakova and Sandholtz, 2012), these nationally oriented narrative formats provide political opportunities for national politicians to shift blame to the EU level for visible events relating to integration that conflict with national identities when interacting with the press. Consequently, this framework is likely to be particularly useful in explanation of situations regarding integration such as the eastern expansions of 2004 and 2007 or rights of free movement of persons and services, where there has developed a

disconnect between economic reality and public opinion regarding consequences of integration (Dobson and Sennikova, 2007). Therefore, it focuses of particular problems or pathologies within media discourse. News narrative provides a medium through which discourse is shaped and structured. Consequently, looking towards possibilities for operationalization, methods such as critical discourse analysis should be suited to empirical study of how national medias' narrative formatting can serve to engender resistance to integration across different issues and in different Member States.<sup>2</sup> Thus, this unpacking of a model of narrative framing in media can be thought of as a contribution toward pinpointing sources of resistance that stand to challenge supranational prospects for integration which may be largely beneficial.

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<sup>2</sup> See Wodak and Meyer's 2009 edited volume for a further elaboration of the above-mentioned method.

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