

Human-Interest Fatigue: Audience Evaluations of a Massive Emotional Story

AUDUN BEYER^{1,2}
TINE USTAD FIGENSCHOU
University of Oslo, Norway

Numerous studies have documented the media's extensive focus on individual cases when reporting on immigration. In this article, we ask how the audience views such human-interest framing when a single story receives disproportionate attention. Employing an explorative survey of a representative sample of the population as the story peaked in the media, we found that the audience is highly critical of the media coverage, particularly regarding the scale and scope of the coverage. This points to an interesting paradox: the human-interest frame, meant to capture audience attention and engagement in a story, actually makes people tired and less engaged when overused.

Keywords: Human-interest framing, irregular immigration, media hype, audience evaluations, media bias

The media are always on the lookout for individuals who are affected by the issues covered in news stories. The topic of immigration is no exception as dramatic individual stories are a key characteristic of immigration coverage in Western media (Benson, 2013). Both immigrants and pro-immigration advocates foreground the individual struggle to gain access to news media, to evoke the public's empathy, and to promote their own viewpoint (Ihlen & Thorbjørnsrud, 2014). The implicit premise for stressing individual cases is a belief that the public will be more interested in individual stories (Graber, 1988; Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992) and feel more empathic to individual immigrants—particularly children and women (Höijer, 2004; Moeller, 2002). Many immigrants and asylum seekers hold an ambiguous status as they can be defined as either intruders (queue jumpers, threats, or frauds), or genuine, innocent victims (Horsti, 2013; Van Gorp, 2005). The stakeholders on all sides of the debate share an understanding that human-interest framing will make their (often conflicting) arguments more compelling and powerful. The present article examines how the audience evaluates and reacts to one such classic individual-against-the-system story—

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Audun Beyer (corresponding author): audun.beyer@media.uio.no
Tine Ustad Figenschou: tineuf@media.uio.no
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one young, female immigrant's battle against deportation—which grew into an example of media hype in Norway in early 2011.

There is a lack of research into how news audiences actually understand and interpret the media coverage of human-interest frames. Studies examining the effects of human-interest framing have most often been experimental studies, focusing on attitudinal change and effects on cognitive information processing. Aiming to illuminate how news audiences react to and evaluate real-life human-interest stories, we conducted an explorative survey study as the story peaked in the media. Using a combination of closed- and open-ended survey questions, the article examines how the audience evaluates the performance of the media compared to other involved actors; whether people are critical, neutral, or positive in their ratings of media performance; and what aspects of the coverage they are critical about. Finally, we ask whether people's positions on political issues influence their evaluations of media coverage. These questions are answered through analyses of one closed and one open item from the survey and a set of independent variables. The answers indicate how saturated, human-interest coverage of the topic of irregular immigration makes the audience react and reveal whether the audience largely wants to see current affairs through the lens of the single-case coverage so often employed by news media.

The article contributes to the understanding of how the audience evaluates real-life human-interest stories, particularly when it comes to *what* respondents emphasize and *how* they themselves formulate media criticism or praise. It finds that the audience evaluates the media lower than other key institutions involved in this particular story. It also demonstrates how the respondents highlight the scale and scope of the coverage, as well as point to media bias. This reveals an interesting paradox: Human faces are believed to make the news more compelling and interesting, a notion shared by media professionals, scholars, and interest groups. However, if a human-interest story becomes so important that it grows into what can be characterized as media hype, the audience starts to question the story and the media.

The article is structured as follows: First, we provide a review and discussion of the literature on news framing and effects of the human-interest frame. Second, we present the case: a massively covered human-interest story that displays many characteristics of media hype. Third, we outline our research questions and method, before we provide the results and answers to the research questions and hypotheses. Last, the findings and limitations of the study are discussed in the concluding section.

News Framing

Framing has become a widely used concept within communication studies during the last decades (Matthes, 2009), as well as within neighboring disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and political sciences (Schaffner & Sellers, 2010). In essence, framing refers to how messages are structured with regard to how some aspects of an issue are made more salient than others (de Vreese, 2003). One of the strengths—but also one of the potential curses—of the framing paradigm is its potential to grasp several parts of the communication process. Framing analyses examine both the construction and production of news (Ihlen & Thorbjørnsrud, 2014), often described as a contest between competing

frames (Reese, 2003), In addition, it involves studies of which frames dominate mediated public discourse, through both qualitative and quantitative text and content analyses (Matthes, 2009, p. 351). Finally, the concept of framing is employed from a psychological perspective to study how individual attitudes (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), evaluations (Iyengar, 1991; Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997), and emotional responses (Gross & D'Ambrosio, 2004; Cho & Gower, 2006) may be contingent upon the encounter between media frames and individual members of the audience.

The literature concerning media frames broadly distinguishes between two types of frames: issue-specific and generic (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Matthes, 2009, p. 350). While issue-specific frames relate to one particular issue, meaning that every issue can have its own unique issue-specific frames, generic frames operate at a somewhat higher level of abstraction and can be used on a wide range of issues (Matthes, 2009). Such generic frames include Iyengar's classic distinction between episodic and thematic frames (Iyengar, 1991), as well as Semetko and Valkenburg's five generic news frames (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000).

The Human-Interest Frame

As one of at least five main *generic* frames³ the human-interest frame is of particular relevance to this study. According to the several definitions that are available, in human-interest framing the media concentrate "on describing individuals and groups who are likely to be affected by an issue" (Neuman et al., 1992, p. 69), and the frame "brings a human face or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue, or problem" (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000, p. 95). The most frequently cited and most thorough operationalization of the human-interest frame can be found in Semetko and Valkenburg's (2000) study of European news. Along with the characteristics already mentioned, this definition states that the frame also personalizes, dramatizes, and emotionalizes the news. Human-interest framing has been frequently employed in the media coverage of immigration in general (Benson, 2013) and asylum seekers in particular (d'Haenens & de Lange, 2001). Analyzing how refugees were portrayed in major U.S. newspapers, Steimel (2010) finds that human-interest framing privileges the victim portrayal (in contrast to portraying refugees as frauds or threats). Since the aim of human-interest stories is to personalize and emotionalize the news, it is more difficult to present a fraud or threat in a way that personally resonates with the audience. Hence, the preference of portraying the individual refugee as a deserving victim seems well designed to capture the audience's attention and engage them emotionally (Steimel, 2010).

What Are the Effects of Human-Interest Framing?

The human-interest frame or schema has not only been analyzed as news framing, but also as a way of understanding issues in a more general way. Studying how a "human-interest schema" (emphasizing those affected by an issue) influence the cognitive efforts made by news audiences, Graber

³ Graber (1988) mentions six, Neuman et al. (1992) mention five, Price, Tewksbury, & Powers (1997) study three, and Semetko & Valkenburg (2000) five. All of them make reference to some kind of human-interest frame or schema.

(1988) describes the “desire to learn about the personal lives . . . of other people” as “one of the most potent incentives for following the news” (p. 212). Moreover, Price, Tewksbury, and Powers (1997) find that “it is widely assumed that audiences are naturally interested in learning about other people” (p. 484). This points to the dual logic of the human-interest frame, as it both concerns a well-documented media logic and a familiar way of dealing with political issues from the perspective of the audience (see Graber, 1988, pp. 212–213; Neuman et al., 1992, pp. 69–72). According to these perspectives on the human-interest frame, it is both what the people want and what the media often use as a constructing principle for many kinds of news.

Experiments and survey studies have documented that the public is generally more positive toward particular immigrant individuals than toward immigrants as a group or category (see Aalberg, Iyengar, & Messing, 2012 for a discussion). Moreover, experimental studies show that a human-interest frame increases the participants’ empathy toward the involved parties (Cho & Gower, 2006). Further, Price et al. (1997) show that human-interest frames influence the topical focus of thoughts such that “the cognitive responses of participants were directed *away* from core story elements and toward ideas related to the frame in question” (p. 494). This finding is in line with the findings of Valkenburg, Semetko, and de Vreese (1999) that respondents who read stories framed as human-interest stories emphasized emotions and individual implications in their responses significantly more often, although human-interest stories can also diminish rather than enhance the recall of factual information. Thus, on the one hand, the human-interest frame makes people interested in the human-interest aspects of the story, but it makes them less interested in more general information about the principles concerning the issues that are covered. On the other hand, recent studies also show that there is a positive contribution to gain in political knowledge from news presented as human-interest framed stories. This is particularly valid for those members of the audience who are the least interested in politics in the first place (Jebriil, de Vreese, van Dalen, & Albæk 2013).

Case: Human-Interest News Serial Turns Media Hype

Madina Salamova, alias “Maria Amelie,” was a young female immigrant who became the voice of irregular immigrants through her autobiography *Illegally Norwegian* published in 2010. Maria Amelie and her parents applied for asylum in Norway in 2002 when she was 17 years old. The application was denied, and the family has been living illegally in Norway since 2003. Maria Amelie’s arrest in January 2011 and her subsequent deportation to Russia caused massive protests, unprecedented media coverage, open conflict within the coalition government, and, consequently, changes to the national immigration legislation (labeled “Lex Amelie”).

Maria Amelie was the “ideal media victim.” (1) She was a known face: In contrast to the nonpersonified, masses of denied asylum-seekers who are deported from Norway every day, she was an author and activist. (2) She was vulnerable: Maria Amelie was a young, fair-skinned female, and she thus easily evoked empathy and a supposed need for protection. As demonstrated in the literature on mediated “victims” (Höijer, 2004; Horsti, 2013; Moeller, 2002), women and children are regarded as the most vulnerable and “worthy” victims. (3) She was a success: Although Maria Amelie had been living in hiding, she had managed to complete an MA, had secured an internship with the national oil company,

and had managed tours and music festivals. Against all odds, she was a perfect immigrant: fluent in Norwegian, well educated and hardworking, and possessing several attractive job offers. (4) She was well connected (Ihlen & Thorbjørnsrud, 2014): Through her book and public engagements, Maria Amelie had an impressive personal network of intellectuals, writers, journalists, and activists. After 12 intense days, a devastated Maria Amelie was deported to Moscow on January 24, but was able to return as a legal expert work migrant on April 16 of the same year.⁴

The Maria Amelie story was covered intensively in Norwegian news media, and a content analysis⁵ of the six most important national newspapers and two TV channels, showed that during the 12 days from the Maria Amelie's arrest to her deportation these national newspapers published 405 articles, an average of 33 small and large articles every day, and the two TV channels aired no less than 70 news items in the same period, making the story one of the most covered issues in Norway in modern times. The story started when Maria Amelie was arrested by five police officers after giving a public speech based on her book. The arrest caused massive criticism and sparked unprecedented media attention. When she was arrested, the broad network of NGOs behind the ongoing "No one is illegal" campaign, numerous student organizations, artists, and intellectuals mobilized on social media platforms, organized demonstrations, and criticized the government in the media. Maria Amelie's network of asylum advocates and media professionals had easy media access and high media competence compared to the supporters of other irregular immigrants. In particular, her boyfriend, op-ed editor in the leading leftist daily, made a difference, tirelessly defending her case and acting as her spokesperson when she was detained. Her advocates employed well-documented strategies in their campaign to let her stay in the country (Ellermann, 2006; Every & Augoustinos, 2008). They foregrounded similarities between her and other Norwegians and de-ethnicized (Horsti, 2013) her public image. Thus, the story is a typical example of the man-against-the-system narrative, frequently used in Western news media coverage of immigration⁶ (Ihlen & Thorbjørnsrud, 2014). As the story gained importance, a few "irregular" individuals and rejected

⁴ The government and immigration authorities firmly and repeatedly stressed that the family had been treated correctly according to the law, that the decision was irreversible, that the law is equal to everyone, and that Maria Amelie had to return to Russia. Behind the scenes, however, the coalition government pushed to change the national immigration legislation on skilled expatriate workers (people with expert competence, who already have a job offer and are in possession of the correct identity papers), making it possible for Maria Amelie to apply for a work permit once she got her papers.

⁵ The content analysis was performed by manually checking all the relevant national and regional media in from Maria Amelie's arrest, to her final deportation to Russia. Basic variables such as outlet, format (news/op ed.), length, quoted sources and their affiliations were mapped. Further, we coded for the presence/absence of several aspects of the human-interest frame (focus on the individual case; focus on feelings; visual information pertaining to the individual case; personal or private information about the individual [beyond information directly relevant to the case]) (see Appendix).

⁶ As a result of massive media coverage a selected few idealized victims occasionally become national icons (Rosello, 1998). These high-profile cases such as the American stories of Elian Gonzalez (1999–2000), Elvira Arellano (2007), and Jose Antonio Vargas (2011), the Maria Amelie story in Norway (2011), and the sans-papiers protesters (1996) in France, receive massive coverage over limited periods of time, helped by different types of support groups and networks.

asylum seekers were introduced. However, even though the backgrounds and destinies of these individuals were as dramatic and strong as the Maria Amelie story, the media presence of the other immigrant individuals was ephemeral as they were only portrayed in the news once or twice. In the Maria Amelie case, her story and character seemed to be sufficient for the media, which did not expand its coverage beyond the key storyline. The content analysis of the coverage showed that it was almost exclusively framed as a human-interest story, focusing on the drama of the unfolding events, zooming in on the one chosen individual; and portraying her struggle in a highly emotional manner.

The news serial is similar to Vasterman's definition of a media hype, with a "sudden materialization of a news wave" (Vasterman, 2005, p. 515) that arose quickly and then faded away. Media hypes are characterized by a coverage that is disproportionate to the relevance of the key event but, when established, it feeds itself and develops a life of its own (p. 509).⁷ Second, media hypes are set off by a key event (the arrest of Maria Amelie), which receive more attention than comparable events. Moreover, the "interaction between the media and social actors" (the campaign and her supporters) lead to increased coverage of both social action and the reactions from social actors (p. 516). Where the Maria Amelie coverage differed from Vasterman's (2005) definition, however, was the lack of comparable incidents and related news to the key event, as the media focused solely on her story.

Research Questions

The media's human-interest framing and repeated criticism of the government and immigration authorities make it an illustrative case to discuss how the audience reacts to and evaluates massively covered human-interest stories during the peak of the coverage. Thus our first research question can be formulated as such:

RQ1: How do people evaluate the media's performance compared with other key institutions when it comes to how they covered the issue?

Some scholars (van Zoonen, 2005; Zaller, 2003) claim that a highly dramatic, intense, and sensational coverage is what is needed to get people interested in political matters and that the human-interest frame may contribute to increased political knowledge among disinterested members of the public (Jebril et al., 2013). Here we have a potent example of such coverage, and we also have respondents' own evaluations of and comments on this coverage as it peaked in the media. Thus the second research question asks:

RQ2a: Are people mainly critical, neutral, or positive in their evaluations of the media's performance?

⁷ Media hypes can be one possible effect of a news journalism operating by the standard suggested by Zaller's (2003) "burglar alarm." The burglar alarm lingers on what Zaller refers to as positive media frenzies characterized by intense and dramatic stories that saturate media coverage between different outlets and formats and are suited to "break the fog of disjointed news" (Zaller, 2003, p. 121) and to engage the public.

We also look more into what aspects people highlight in their evaluations of media performance. Here we emphasize how the audience reacts to and evaluates how a real-life human-interest story played out in the media, and not so much how the audience themselves think in terms of the human-interest narrative (Graber, 1988; Neuman et al., 1992). Further, aiming to go beyond the studies that explore how frames are mirrored in respondents' thoughts (Price et al., 1997; Valkenburg et al., 1999), we explicitly ask respondents to evaluate the coverage in their own words:

RQ2b: What do people highlight as the most important aspects in their evaluations of the media coverage?

Third, we ask whether the respondents' opinion of the issue is related to the evaluation of the coverage. In line with the theory concerning the hostile media phenomenon (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985) we would expect those with strong issue involvement to be more critical of media coverage than those not involved. For this study, however, we analyze issue involvement only for those with strict attitudes toward immigration, and differences between those that want Maria Amelie to stay and those that want her to leave. Thus the two final hypotheses can be formulated:

H1: People with stricter views on immigration will be more critical toward media performance

H2: People that want her to stay are more positive toward media coverage than those that want her to leave.

These questions are answered through analyses of one closed and one open item from the survey and a set of independent variables. The answers reveal how a highly saturated human-interest coverage of the topic of irregular immigration makes the audience react. Furthermore, the answers determine if the majority of the audience wants to see current affairs through the lens of the single-case coverage so often employed by news media.

Method

Survey

Norstat, one of the main Norwegian public opinion bureaus, carried out the survey online on a panel of Norwegian Internet who are representative of the Norwegian Internet user population (*female 50%; M_{age}: 46.69; education: 59% have some kind of university education or above*⁸). Norstat reported a response rate for online data collection, RR = 26.1%. The field dates for the survey were January 26–31,

⁸ In Norway, about 94% of the population has access to the Internet (Statistics Norway). The mean age for the population is 39 years, and about 30% of people over 16 have some kind of university education. For groups between 25 and 50, this share ranges from 37% to 47%. This means that our sample is somewhat older and better educated than the population as a whole. As more educated people are often more positive toward immigration but also more critical of the media, this should be taken into account when interpreting the results.

immediately after the deportation of Maria Amelie, and 1001 respondents answered the survey. Participants were all asked questions regarding gender, age, education, and party affiliation. Respondents were also asked if they were aware of the news coverage relevant to the study, and if not they were not asked questions regarding their evaluation of the case. Further, respondents were asked to evaluate the performance of key institutions (government, police, immigration authorities, political opposition, media) on a 5-point scale. Respondents were also asked an open-ended question on their opinion of how the media had covered the issue.

Earlier studies on the effects of the human-interest frame are mainly experiments and have used thought-listing procedures to observe how respondents activate knowledge when they process messages (e.g. Price et al., 1997). In this survey, however, we were not so much interested in actual knowledge about the issue at hand but more in how respondents thought about the way the media had covered the issue. This involves an evaluation of how they think about something, but not as an introspective evaluation about their own thought processes, which would have been more problematic, as stated by Price et al. (1997) (with a reference to Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). Our procedure, therefore, resembles a thought-listing procedure, but we also needed to ask respondents about their evaluation of media performance. These evaluations can be generated by both evaluations made on the spot and evaluations that people had formed prior to their participation in the survey. As the issue had saturated media coverage for the two weeks prior to the survey, and as evaluations of the media also had been part of the media coverage itself, we find it highly probable that, prior to the survey, the majority of respondents had indeed been forming opinions about the way the media had behaved.

Measurement of Variables

The answers to the open-ended question were first coded on a general level for direction of evaluation (positive; neutral; negative/critical). Then six variables were constructed based on a close reading of all responses, and the answers were coded for presence or absence on these evaluative dimensions. These concrete variables were:

- **Critical of the massive coverage, the volume.** Critical of the scale of the coverage, saying it was exaggerated, overexposed, or excessive.
- **Critical of the focus on emotions > facts.** Either critical of emotions, or saying that the focus on emotions led to less focus on facts.
- **Critical of focus on individual > group in similar (or worse) situation** (one or both of them present). Either general criticism of the single case, or saying that the focus on a single case led to less focus on other groups.
- **Content with case coverage.** Saying that the case illuminates the wider issue and keeps it on the news agenda.

- **Critical of perceived media bias.** Saying that the media were pro-Maria Amelie or claims of general bias, one-sidedness, lack of balance or manipulative media.
- **Critical of sensationalism/paparazzi style coverage.** E.g. the media, journalists and photographers were preying on her, following her every movement from her apartment, to her encounters with the government, etc.⁹

These variables were established in cooperation by two coders (the authors), and were then coded by both. In the coding process we discussed difficult cases, which led to some recoding of some of the variables for all cases.

Results

Critical and Competent Audience?

One of the important references that the media made in the early days of the coverage of the case was that the government and the immigration authorities were out of line with the general public opinion. The media made reference to various demonstrations and media-initiated surveys¹⁰ that allegedly showed that a majority supported Maria Amelie and wanted her to be allowed to stay in the country. It should, however, be noted that after only a few days there was a swing in public opinion, and more people then said that she should not be granted permission to stay in the country.¹¹ In line with the discussion concerning human-interest narratives as one of the main reasons why people turn to the news, and whether such stories make people interested in the wider issue, we wanted to explore how the audience evaluated media performance (RQ1) and also what they thought of the media coverage of the issue (RQ2ab).

Evaluation of performance concerning the issue was first measured with a closed item that asked respondents to state how well different actors had performed, from 1 (very badly) to 5 (very well). The government received a lot of criticism in the media during the news serial, but it was regarded as the institution that performed best in the survey, with a mean score of 3.1. Overall, the government was the only actor that averaged more positively than negatively in audience evaluations of performance. Also, the immigration administration and the police, the institutions responsible for the arrest of Maria Amelie and the resolutions leading to her arrest and deportation, were criticized quite harshly in the media. The audience, however, gave them both a mean score of 2.9 on how well they had performed concerning the case. The political opposition, while quite invisible in much of the coverage, received a mean score of

⁹ For percentages, see Table 2.

¹⁰ In an opinion poll for the largest popular newspaper (VG), conducted by InFact on January 15 2011, 61% stated that Maria Amelie should be allowed to stay in the country, whereas 27% wanted her deported to Russia.

¹¹ On January 21, InFact conducted a follow-up poll in which 48% argue she should be deported and 40% support her right to stay in the country. These findings are highlighted as "the people have turned against" Maria Amelie.

2.9.¹² The media were evaluated as having the lowest performance, with a mean score of 2.5. This indicates how many members of the audience were indeed quite critical of how the media covered the issue and the kinds of prioritization that were given by the media when it comes to coverage of the issue.

We wanted to explore how different background variables might explain the variation when it comes to the evaluation of the media. Audience members' use of the media could be thought of as a key variable, as increased exposure to news media might contribute to some sort of fatigue over the extensive coverage. We constructed a regression model to explore this further and also added other variables (gender, age, education, attitude toward immigration).

Table 1. Regression Model; Evaluation of Media Handling of Issue.

| | Unstandardized Coefficient | | Standardized Coefficient | T | Sig. |
|---|----------------------------|----------------|--------------------------|--------|------|
| | B | Standard Error | Beta | | |
| (Constant) | .363 | .266 | | 8.887 | .000 |
| Age (cont.) | .008 | .002 | .111* | 3.144 | .002 |
| Gender (m = 1, f = 2) | .313 | .070 | .141* | 4.480 | .000 |
| Education (years above high school) | -.141 | .043 | -.104* | -3.258 | .001 |
| Attitude toward immigration (0-10, higher means more strict view) | -.061 | .013 | -.154* | -4.849 | .000 |
| Watch TV news | .025 | .046 | .019 | .542 | .588 |
| Read national newspaper | .000 | .037 | .000 | -.005 | .996 |

Dep. var.: How did the media handle the issue? (1-very badly, 2-badly, 3-neither bad nor good, 4-good, 5-very good) (Adj. R sq. .054) (*=sig at <.002)

All the standard variables showed a significant contribution to the model, but none of the media-use variables produced significant effects. Women were more positive about media performance than men. Older people were also more positive. People with a stricter attitude to immigration were more negative toward the media than people with a more liberal view (strengthening H1). Respondents with higher education were also more negative toward media performance. To conclude, the audience was more critical about the media than other involved parties, but there is no sign that this critical attitude had much to do with the level of media use. It is interesting that we see no effect of media use, as one could expect those more exposed would grow more tired of the issue. That said, media use does not necessarily equate with media exposure in this case. This issue was everywhere for the two weeks it lasted, and even media users with low use would almost certainly encounter this story several times as it

¹² It should be noted that the distribution of answers on the opposition variable was very different from the other actors, as almost half the respondents selected neither good nor bad (3).

dominated headlines in TV news, newspapers, and online news, as well as in debate programs and online discussion forums.

For partisans with a fairly restrictive view on immigration, we find evidence of a form of the hostile media phenomenon (Vallone et al., 1985), as they rate the media more harshly than others with different views on immigration. We also see (not included in the model) that those respondents planning to vote for either the right-wing Progress Party or the Labour Party view the media more critically than other voters. The Progress Party has clear issue ownership and a strict policy on immigration issues, and the Labour Party is the main government party which has certain issue ownership and, recently, has been quite strict on immigration (Karlsen & Aardal, 2011). Finally, for H2, we find that respondents who want Maria Amelie to stay are much more positive in their evaluation of media performance than those who want her to leave (see Figure 1).

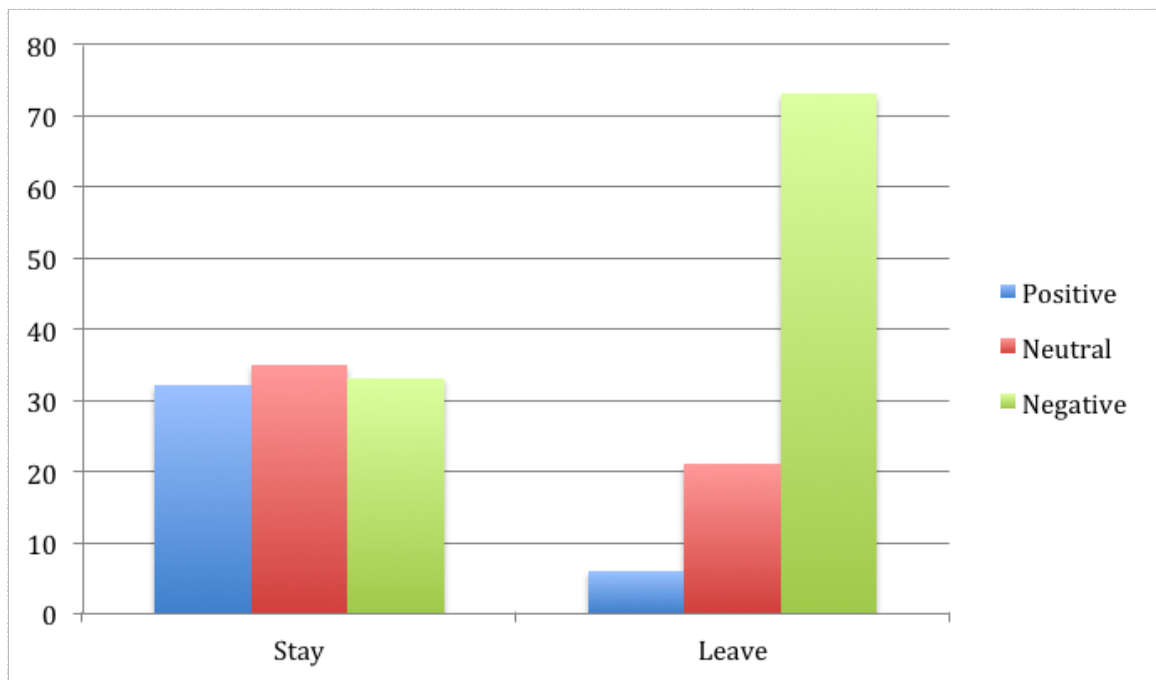


Figure 1. Percent with positive, neutral, or negative evaluation of the media grouped by those respondents that want her to stay or leave.

We now move one step further in the analysis and explore what this critical attitude is all about. How do people express themselves when asked to evaluate media coverage saturated by the human-interest frame

Scale, Scope, and Biased Media

As demonstrated above, many respondents are fairly critical of the coverage. About two-thirds of the respondents were critical of the coverage on a general level, 17% were coded as neutral evaluations, and 13% were coded as giving mainly positive evaluations when they formulated their view of the media coverage in their own words. As a last step, we will look into *what* people were critical about and what they thought of as positive with regards to the media coverage. These are the aspects of the media coverage that the respondents mentioned when asked to write their views on the media coverage of the case. The respondents were not given any keywords, or guided on what to emphasize in their evaluations.

Table 2. Percentages of Open-Ended Answers Coded as Forms of Specific Criticism, N:1000.

| | |
|--|-----|
| Critical of the volume of the coverage | 49% |
| Critical of the focus on emotions rather than facts | 2% |
| Critical of the focus on an individual rather than a more representative group | 13% |
| Content with case coverage | 2% |
| Critical of perceived media bias | 18% |
| Critical of sensationalism | 8% |

The clearest criticism toward the media is the sheer volume of the coverage. Analyzing the responses, we find that almost half of the respondents formulate a critique regarding the scale of the coverage. Without being asked to state anything about the scale, they say that the coverage was too extensive—that there was too much coverage altogether. This is the clearest and most specific evidence of a critique of the hype that developed during the two intensive weeks. However, it also points to an implicit critique of the human-interest framing, as the story was entirely framed within the human-interest frame, a point substantiated by the other aspects of the criticism, discussed below.

The respondents also referred to the scope of the coverage, in this case particularly to how this single case was used. Thirteen percent of respondents stated they were critical of the use of this single case, often by juxtaposing it to other relevant cases, or even to the more general issue concerning irregular immigration. While this may not seem a very large proportion we must keep in mind that the respondents were not given any keywords to focus on in their evaluations.

The last main finding from the open item was related to the belief that the media operate with some kind of bias. While it is not a new finding that the public has opinions about media bias, we were somewhat surprised to find that as many as one in five stated that the media were biased in this case. The reason for this finding may be due to several factors. The media received criticism during the coverage for taking sides on the issue, and some respondents may have picked up this criticism. It is also probable that the scale of the issue may have led to this kind of criticism, as the amount of coverage was so large that it led to decreased coverage of other issues. Last, the concept of bias may be an inherent effect of human-interest coverage in itself, because the way such framing works makes it harder

to cover individuals in a balanced way (Benson, 2013; Steimel, 2010). The concept of bias is also related to the aforementioned hostile media phenomenon, and, in this case, where there are signs of an unbalanced coverage, we might have observed the relative hostile media effect that can be observed when respondents are given strongly-slanted stories (see Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001 for a study on unbalanced news content)

Human-interest framing is said to focus on emotions but although the news series was highly dramatic, emotional, and touching, the audience do not explicitly discuss emotions in their evaluations (only 2% of the responses say that they were critical of the way emotions were used in the news serial). Having said that, the emotional reports about Maria Amelie may have contributed to the criticism of the single-case focus and of a media bias discussed above.

Moreover, there are only 2% that explicitly give a positive evaluation that says anything more than "good enough." In these few cases, they refer to the positive effect that the focus on this particular case has had for the issue in general.

Discussion and Conclusion

The human-interest frame leads to downplaying perspectives that can be said to be "the other side of the issue" and, thus, people may feel that the media coverage was biased. Human-interest framing is an efficient narrative technique to demonstrate the human consequences of particular policies, and is often referred to as a necessary frame for political issues because of the need to capture and retain the audience's interest in political issues. In this paper we have documented that the audience was highly critical of the way the story was covered. The respondents express clear and distinct critiques of media bias, sensationalism, and the single-case approach that leads attention away from more general perspectives. While there are also those among the public who praise the media for highlighting one case to illuminate a broader issue, these voices are few.

The notion that audiences are critical toward the news and even view the news as biased is not something new (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997, pp. 209–213). However, trust in politicians and political institutions is about as low as people's trust in the media on a general level. How, then, should we understand the survey respondents' critical evaluations of the media in this particular case, where the issue was framed in a format which is believed to be preferred by audiences (the human-interest narrative)? In the following section we provide several tentative explanations for this situation, based on the respondents' own evaluations of media performance.¹³

The Exhausted Public

This explanation points to several factors that are due to the massive coverage as well as the fact that some of the media were in fact slanted in their coverage of Maria Amelie. First, due to the

¹³ It should be noted that we are concerned with the critical opinions here, and that several respondents also voiced supportive opinions of both Maria Amelie and the media coverage.

massive, almost repetitive coverage, many people may have experienced some sort of *compassion fatigue* (Moeller, 1999). This may partly involve the human-interest framing: sometimes the focus on the emotional, single case may just prove to be too much for viewers. Almost half of the responses stated that the coverage had gotten out of hand regarding the sheer scale of it all. As one respondent put it:

It was too intense; we lose interest and get bored of it all (Resp. no. 541)

Others elaborated more than this, pointing to why the media might have behaved like they did:

It is overexposed—they made a mountain out of a molehill. It's easy for the media to portray one sweet, young girl as a victim. It's a good story. It sells newspapers and attracts viewers (Resp. no. 75)

Steimel (2010) notes that the human-interest frame itself may lead to evaluations that imply that the media does not fulfill its role as an objective party. It is hard to avoid weighing the perspectives of the person depicted as a victim when using the human-interest frame, and thus the perspectives that might tell another part of the story are downplayed. The massive coverage might have led people to view the issue as slanted and to feel the scale of coverage got out of hand. Respondent no. 434 puts it like this:

Completely hopeless. [The media] are sensationalist, they downplay the facts, and they play on emotions in one individual case without conveying the wider consequences of changing the law.

This view of the media as biased was not uncommon among respondents. Both the widespread use of the human-interest frame and the scale of the coverage might have contributed to this, but one should not neglect the fact that parts of the media coverage also discussed possible bias in the media. Later criticism and statements from editors within the NRK (public service broadcaster) acknowledged that the media indeed might have been rather carried away in their coverage.

Even though respondents who voiced critical opinions frequently held a stricter view on immigration policies than other respondents, this was not always the case, and several respondents who were sympathetic toward Maria Amelie's case were highly critical of the coverage. Respondent no. 395 sums it up like this:

The media has not given a balanced account of the story. Even though I personally think she should be granted residence, I also see that this is not an easy decision for those implementing the asylum policy. It is important that the law is equal for everyone.

Here we also see that the frame argued in the media by government officials clearly resonate in the respondent's view, namely that the law should be equal for all irregular immigrants. This frame was a part of the very consistent message that was given by the state secretary acting as the government spokesperson throughout the news serial (Larsen, 2012).

Public Opinion was Misunderstood by the News Media

The critical evaluations of the media may imply that the perceived public support for Maria Amelie, frequently reported in much of the early coverage of the issue, may have been a misrepresentation by the media. From the content analysis we find that the media elites (the in-house analysts/commentators, the editors, and the most profiled reporters) were very critical of the authorities' handling of the case. This criticism dovetailed with a broader criticism of the government at the time—that it had become distanced from the public and did not understand its popular foundation. Perhaps it was the chattering classes (the media elites and the cultural elites) that were out of touch with the people, not the immigration authorities. Several respondents also seem to acknowledge a view that the media was out of touch with a volatile public opinion in these matters. Respondent no. 487 put it like this:

The media coverage was exaggerated and biased. First everyone sympathized with her, and then they turned against her. The 50 other Russian asylum seekers that were deported were only mentioned in one tiny news brief.

As demonstrated by Ellermann (2006), when forced deportations are conducted in the public eye, they often evoke strong reactions and broad mobilization as people come face-to-face with the costs of the immigration legislation. Although the public supports a strict and efficient immigration law in principle, they often shift toward emphasizing what they perceive as the high costs of deportation during the implementation phase (p. 7). The critical evaluations of the media coverage and claims that the news serial was overexposed may also reflect a transition back to the normal restrictionist view. Previous research supports this argument, as popular mobilizations for irregular immigrants have often been ephemeral (Chimienti, 2011; Ellermann, 2006). Thus, the media critique that came to be part of the coverage itself may have contributed to making this aspect more salient in the minds of audiences.

The Timing of the Survey

Finally, it is worth considering the timing of the survey. While support for Maria Amelie was probably higher in the early stages of the coverage, it was probably at its lowest in the first days after she had been sent back to Russia. Maria Amelie and her supporters had repeatedly warned that it would be dangerous for her to go back to Russia. Whenever she was asked about Russia in interviews, she fought back tears and stressed how terrified she was to be sent back.

However, when she was sent out of the country, there were journalists on the airplane with her, and she was met by more journalists in Moscow. In the following days she and her boyfriend were interviewed on the streets and cafes of Moscow, often in a joyful mood, and there was little evidence of this being a particularly dangerous location for her. Thus, some members of the audience may have felt that they had been manipulated. Some of the respondents might also have been influenced by the coverage following her deportation to Russia. Respondent no. 558 voices a quite critical opinion:

Exaggerated! One-sided. It was portrayed as if the migration authorities are

incompetent and stupid, when they have in fact treated her case fairly . . . They have portrayed Maria as incredibly sweet and sympathetic, and I doubt she is . . .

Limitations and Future Research

The case of Maria Amelie provided an excellent opportunity to perform an investigation into how the public evaluates real-life human-interest stories as they play out in the media. The story turned into an example of media hype that has few parallels in Norwegian media when it comes to the amount and intensity of the coverage. At the same time, the individual-against-the-system story represents a recurrent, frequently used script in the coverage of immigration (Ihlen & Thorbjørnsrud, 2014). However, the unique strengths of this study also pose serious limitations to the possibility of making it broader. In the following we address these limitations and suggest how future research may try to disentangle the effects of human-interest framed media hypes.

First, the use of a single-case approach can never lead to generalizations to a broader population. What these extreme cases can do is to make the mechanisms involved in cases of media hype more clear. In the case reported here the inability of the media to move beyond the human-interest frame makes an interesting contribution that should be explored further. As we note below, what should be addressed in future research is how one should disentangle the different effects of media hype, framing, and the nature of the case itself.

Second, the public opinion data used in the study is cross-sectional, and a follow-up study to check if attitudes were long-term or rather more ephemeral was not possible to perform. Since the evaluation of media-hype should be studied in a real-life context, making experiments more difficult (but by no means impossible), the desired design could have involved a follow-up survey either with a sample of the same respondents, making it a panel study, or by performing a new survey altogether. However, the time frame and economic considerations made such endeavors impossible at the time. Future research should definitely try to employ some sort of longitudinal perspective to the study of evaluations of real-life media-hypes.

Third, as the hype was laden with a human-interest narrative it proved hard to disentangle the effects of the hype itself and the framing of the stories. The data suggest, however, that it was the volume of coverage that was the main reason for people's negative impressions of media performance. We have reason to believe that it was indeed the powerful combination of the hype and the human-interest framing that caused such critical evaluations, but the design does not allow us to conclude on this point. Later studies should try to disentangle these effects by providing stimulus materials in controlled experiments that make us able to obtain a clearer view of what actually happens when people evaluate coverage that involves media hype.

Finally, a remark on the sample of respondents should be made, as our Web survey sample differed to some degree from the population, especially with regard to education. We believe that the sample meets many of the criteria that make it possible to provide some sort of generalization to the population. For instance, the Norwegian Internet population is very large, as some 94% of the total

population has access to the Internet. However, a sample with substantially higher education than the population can to some degree deceive us, as we know that highly educated people almost certainly are more competent media users, and hence more critical of the way the media covers public affairs. In addition, people with higher education are generally more positive toward immigration and immigrants, and these aspects of the sample should be taken into consideration when interpreting our results.

Appendix

Human-interest framing: *Human-interest frame.* This frame brings a human face or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue, or problem (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000, p. 95). Such a frame refers to an effort to personalize the news, dramatize, or "emotionalize" the news in order to capture and retain audience interest (not to be confused with "human-interest stories/news" which is most often used to describe "soft news" such as sports, lifestyle, entertainment etc.). Code no (0) / yes (1-4) for presence of the following aspects of the news item (cf. Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000):

- 0 = No
- 1 = Maria Amelie
- 2 = Close friends/boyfriend/family MA (all identified as such in text)
- 3 = Other paperless/illegal immigrants
- 4 = Others

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