

Limits of Media Effects - Studying Framing in the Wild

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1. Framing Effects

A large literature in political communication suggests large framing effects on political attitudes. However, this evidence is almost exclusively experimental in nature. It is **unclear how well these findings generalise** to the real world.

Observational media effects studies mostly assessing long-term changes (Foos & Bischof 2022) or interested in „slant“ broadly, with little consideration of the precise changes in media content driving this (Grossman et al. 2022; Levendusky 2023).

→ MORE RESEARCH ON SHORT-/MEDIUM-TERM IMPACT OF MEDIA FRAMING NEEDED

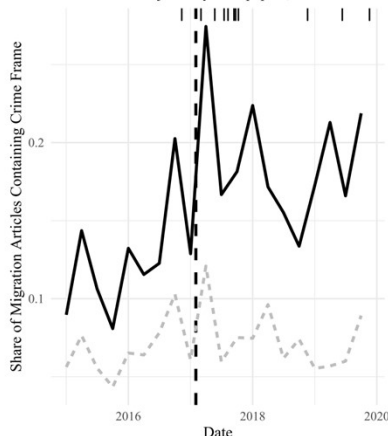
Emphasis Framing:

Emphasis of certain considerations, guiding the recipient to evaluate an issue with those considerations in mind that are promoted by the frame.

2. The Case

In December 2016, Kai Dieckmann, the chief editor of the tabloid *Bild*, leaves over allegations of sexual harassment. Julian Reichelt, known for his advocacy of a ‚sober view on immigrants‘, takes over. In the following months, *Bild* increasingly emphasises crime in its migration coverage.

Quarterly Share of Migration Content Devoted to Crime Frames
Bild vs. other major daily newspapers, 2016–2020



Change in Emphasis of Crime in Migration Coverage following Reichelt takeover, Bild vs. other outlets.

Provides **quasi-experiment**: Sudden change in framing, exogenously timed.

More-likely case:

- Large, influential outlet.
- Strong frame on contested issue.

→ UPPER LIMIT ESTIMATE OF INFLUENCE OF A SINGLE OUTLET ON PUBLIC OPINION ON SALIENT ISSUES

3. Measuring Media Framing

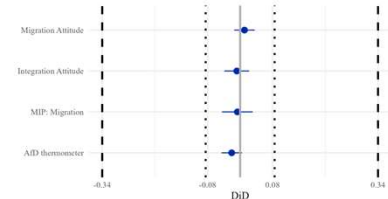
- Collection of 2.5M news articles.
- Annotation of stratified sample for crime and immigration content.
- Classification of remainder using fine-tuned BERT models.
- Near-perfect performance in classification task:

Migration classifier	Crime classifier
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accuracy: 0.96 • F1: 0.94 • Recall: 0.93 • Precision: 0.95 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accuracy: 0.93 • F1: 0.86 • Recall: 0.92 • Precision: 0.8
3.6% of articles about migration.	7% of migration content about crime.

4. Estimation

Comparison of Bild readers and non-Bild readers allows *Difference-in-Differences* design (DiD). *GLES 2017 Election Panel* (Debus, Faas, and Roßteutscher 2017) with 15 waves from 2016–2020 provides ideal data to measure attitudinal changes over time.

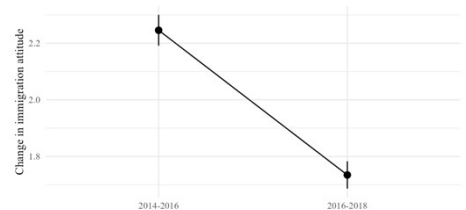
Precise null effects are found for changes on immigration attitudes, integration attitudes, problem perceptions of migration, as well as support for the far-right AfD.



Further analyses:

- No consumption effects.
- No heterogeneity across different news diets.
- No substantial effects of long-term exposure.

→ NO DISCERNIBLE EFFECT OF SUBSTANTIAL CHANGE IN *BILD*'S IMMIGRATION COVERAGE



→ EVIDENCE OF ATTITUDE CRYSTALLISATION

5. Conclusion & Limitations

The findings suggest **very limited influence** of even large news outlets on politicised issues, supporting empirical findings of attitudinal stability and persistence of crystallised attitudes (Kustov, Laaker, and Reller 2021; Lecheler, De Vreese, and Slothuus 2009). Instead, attitude formation among the public takes place during **brief windows of opportunity** for media effects.

This research is limited in several aspects: first, while these findings likely travel to issues such as the assault on Ukraine, less salient issues might be more responsive. Additionally, the public might be more reactive to increased issue emphasis rather than framing or react to visual framing online and on television.

References

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¹NICOLAI BERK is part of the Research Training Group DYNAMICS, funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) – 390285477/GRK 2458.

