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Frames of the 2008 Russian Election

During the months leading up to the 2008 Russian presidential election, the American news coverage of Russia increased and began to present alarming depictions of the Russian government. As Dmitry Medvedev, Vladimir Putin's endorsed candidate, enjoyed a successful campaign and eventually was elected president, questions regarding the current president's influence and possibly corrupt involvement in the election began to surface. However, coverage of this event was not the same across all media outlets and sources. The various differences in the presentation of issues surrounding the Russian election can be largely attributed to the process of framing. Through framing, stories and issues are shaped, thus ensuring that the audience is left with a desired interpretation and an intended message. A tool for forming public opinion, a frame is a way of packaging a story to encourage a certain way of thinking about an issue. In order to better understand how different news sources have framed the subject of this highly controversial election, this study examines both a liberal American newspaper, *The New York Times*, and a conservative American newspaper, *The Wall Street Journal*. To further the scope of the study, *The Moscow Times*, a Russian newspaper written primarily for expatriates living in Russia, is also examined. The study compares 10 news articles published between January 10, 2008 and March 4, 2008 from each of these three newspapers. Its findings provide insight into the real issues of the election and shows how people's opinions of the presidential race might be shaped depending on which newspaper is read. Although the overarching frame of President Putin controlling the election is used in all three newspapers, each source also utilizes additional frames: current events-focused in *The New York Times*, economic in *The Wall Street Journal*, and local in *The Moscow Times*.

Playing an integral role in the presentation of news, framing is the process of controlling the release of information in which a piece of news is presented in such a way so as to elicit a specific desired interpretation. In other words, “framing is a cognitive device used in information encoding, interpreting, and retrieving,” or according to Reese, framing is “organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time and work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world” (Stohl January 5, 7). By defining what the issue is, how it should be thought of and what is necessary to change it, frames are used to encourage a desired interpretation of the story through how it is presented. A story about a demonstrator making negative statements about the government could be framed as a positive expression of free speech or a negative display of anti-patriotism, depending on which view the framer is trying to convey. A frame can influence the audience, thereby making a story biased toward one perspective or another without revealing the true objective of the news producer. An issue can be framed by manipulating any part of the story from the language and headlines to the photographs and captions. Even the subjects of the articles and the use and selection of quotes are used to enforce frames and persuade audiences to form a specific opinion (Stohl, 2008B). Overall, frames are essential to how news and information are presented and transmitted to the public and are present in almost all news stories.

The implications of this important process are especially evident in the 2008 Russian presidential election. Current president Vladimir Putin’s time in office has almost run out and he has announced that he will not be seeking to amend the constitution to make running for a third term possible. Putin has been president since 2000, and the overall feeling of many Russians is that he has accomplished many great things for the nation, such as improving the economy and standard of living. However, he has also been accused of having a cold disposition and of being

anti-Western and power-hungry. Putin is now extremely popular with the general public, in large part because of the great stability that he represents. On December 10, 2007, Putin's party, United Russia, informally nominated Dmitry Medvedev to follow his predecessor's legacy and become the next Russian President. Medvedev is the current First Deputy Prime Minister of Russia and the Chairman of Gazprom, the largest gas producer in the world and the largest company in Russia. Only a week after his unofficial nomination, this candidate was formally endorsed by United Russia and the Kremlin, including President Putin. Due to Putin's huge popularity and support in Russia, his extremely powerful position, and his innumerable government connections, this nomination came almost as a decree. Many politicians, journalists, and people around the world foresaw that Medvedev would most definitely be elected after his presidential endorsement. With much controversy surrounding the legitimacy of the elections and how the new government will function after the new president takes his position, these major themes dominate the media's coverage of the 2008 Russian presidential elections.

After reviewing the 30 examined articles devoted to the elections in Russia, it is clear that the frame of Putin dominating the entirety of the presidential race is evident in each and every story. From word choice to topics of the articles, there is no question that the most pervasive way to portray the election is that the current president is completely in charge. Keeping in mind Putin's choice of Medvedev as his successor, this frame is clearly seen in two main ways. The first indication is the portrayal of the election itself as predetermined and Medvedev as guaranteed to win; the second is that serious opponents of Medvedev and the government are shown to have been eliminated.

The first way that this frame is exemplified is through the overwhelming presentation of the election as already decided and the proposed president as already elected. In one of *The New*

York Times' articles, past leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, states that the election's result was "predictable from the outset" and "predetermined by the enormous role that Vladimir Putin played (Chivers, 2008C)." In another article from the same newspaper, this sentiment is echoed by the statement that "Mr. Putin's allies now control nearly all the offices, and elections have become a formality (Levy, 2008B)." *The Wall Street Journal* states that "Russia's presidential election...is devoid of all suspense as Dmitry Medvedev...heads for a landslide victory (Osborn, 2008)." Moreover, *The Moscow Times* refers to Medvedev as "expected to easily win in the March presidential election after President Vladimir Putin backed his candidacy..." (Twickel, 2008). Furthermore, in describing Medvedev, all three newspapers' word choice is well-calculated, expressing the sentiments above. *The New York Times* refers to Medvedev as "the Kremlin's favorite choice" while *The Wall Street Journal* opts for "handpicked successor (Chivers, 2008A; Osborn, 2008)." *The Wall Street Journal* also states that "Medvedev is virtually certain to win the presidency" and *The Moscow Times* calls him the "likely next president (White, 2008B; Mereu, 2008B)." The three newspapers discuss the predetermination of the election and Medvedev's assured success in being granted the presidency, indicating the frame that Putin is in complete control.

The existence of this frame is further proven by the depiction of the elimination of Medvedev's opposition as also central to Putin's plan. Headlines such as "Russian Inquiries Threaten an Opposition Candidacy" and "Russia Bars Opposition Candidate From March 2 Ballot (*The New York Times*)," make it clear that the Russian government is being portrayed as trying to remove any threat of possible opponents (Chivers, 2008A, B). In the *Wall Street Journal* article, "Bonuses tied to Russian vote," the current Russian government is criticized for keeping only "enfeebled" competitors in the race to ensure the appearance of a real choice and

excluding “more vociferous opponents” like Kasyanov (Osborn, 2008). *The Moscow Times* follows suit with its article, “Opposition Activist Put in Mental Ward,” which states that a prominent activist in the oppositional party, “Other Russia,” was targeted and imprisoned due to the strong likelihood of him running in governmental elections (Nowak, 2008). This sobering event, along with the other examples of the election’s predetermined outcome and the removal of the competition, show the frame of Putin having full control over the presidential race in all three newspapers.

Although all three newspapers feature this frame of Putin as the master puppeteer, they each also utilize frames that differ from one another. *The New York Times*, for example, often frames its stories in a contemporary perspective, focusing on describing current events. Its language is characterized by many adjectives and colorfully descriptive phrases, pictures and quotes, and less background or in-depth coverage. *The Wall Street Journal* uses an economic frame, concentrating on the role of economic issues in the election. Its articles include more comprehensive descriptions of context and many of them contain statistics, charts, or graphs. *The Moscow Times* uses a local frame in which stories are related back to their effects on Russia. Many smaller-scale events are covered and even in the more mainstream articles, more specific details are presented than in the other two newspapers. The language is simple and the articles also feature fewer quotes.

The New York Times takes a current events approach to framing its articles. Its stories relate to what is currently happening and do not give much context or background information. Consequently, there is more room for description. Thus, the events presently taking place are vividly written about using overly-expressive language and linguistic tools such as metaphors, personification, and alliteration. Also, the use of quotes and pictures is greatest in this

newspaper, thereby painting a clear picture of the current political situation, while still leaving out what has led up to these events. Headlines such as “Putin’s Iron Grip on Russia Suffocates Opponents” and “Putin Protégé Secures Election Victory” demonstrate that these articles focus on dramatically portraying the events presently happening (Levy, 2008(b) and 2008(c)). Most of these stories give very brief, if any, analyses of the contexts surrounding the issues. Instead, they focus on ensuring that the audience has a clear picture of the current situation by presenting a large number of descriptive facts regarding this existing activity, not the background of the issue.

This lack of context, however, is not to say that these articles are in any way dry. Instead, the election in Russia is described with colorful language, thus sustaining the reader’s interest. When discussing the wrong-doings of the Kremlin, one article uses the phrase “excessive concentration of power and deep-rooted fear of political plurality” while another discusses the president, saying that “Mr. Putin basked in the praise and seemed to revel in the criticism (Chivers, 2008B; Chivers, 2008E).” Furthermore, the results of the election were described as “unashamedly fake” as Putin was called “a leader of icy resolve” and was said to have “smothered the political opposition (Chivers, 2008E; Chivers, 2008G; Levy, 2008B).” One article even referred to “Mr. Medvedev’s mushrooming entourage (Kotkin, 2008).” All of these examples prove how intense and descriptive language is used to characterize what is now happening in Russia.

The use of quotes and pictures furthers *The New York Times’s* ability to descriptively express the current events surrounding the election by presenting real accounts of what is happening in Russia. Many of the *Times’* articles display a high number of quotes and more importantly, have not only Russian and American sources, but also quotes from other international figures. Pictures are very important, as well, as they bring stories to life. For

example, accompanying an article that discusses Putin's last press conference in which he announced his plans to stay in the public arena, a picture shows him exiting the stage with his head looking back over his shoulder towards the crowd he had just addressed (Chivers, 2008E). This picture depicts his powerful position and plan for retaining power, in spite of his upcoming title change. Furthermore, to emphasize the alliance between Putin and Medvedev discussed in the accompanying article, a picture features the two together at the post-election rock concert in Red Square (Levy, 2008C). Again, the image enhances the message of the article. *The New York Times* uses a current-event-oriented frame which uses descriptive language, quotes, and pictures to clearly describe what is presently happening, not what has led up to the relevant issues.

The Wall Street Journal uses an economic frame to discuss the presidential race; almost all 10 articles describe the events of the election in relation to the economy. Although the main issues and key players related to the election are still covered in this newspaper, here, they are associated with money, gas, and other economic issues. "That Other Presidential Campaign" is an article discussing the general trends of the election, yet most of the issues mentioned have an economic edge (Kaminski, 2008). This can be seen by the inclusion of such information as the number of billionaires in Russia, the percentage of economic growth in St. Petersburg, and the increase in the price of oil, among other issues. Due to the general focus of economics on overall trends and numbers, it is no surprise that this newspaper examines the context of events and includes statistics and predictions. In "A Modernizing Czar," significant background information is given about the state of the economy before Putin took office in 2000. Providing a more in-depth look at events leading up to current situations is more prevalent in this economically-framed newspaper

Although quotes and some pictures do appear in *The Wall Street Journal*, graphs and charts are more common throughout the newspaper. In an article dealing with Putin's choice of Medvedev and the candidate's past, a colorful graph shows the dramatic rise in support for Medvedev after his endorsement by Putin (Cullison & White, 2008). An informative chart entitled "Medvedev's Milestones" also accompanies an article questioning whether the new president will actually hold power and shows his various accomplishments throughout his life (Cullison, 2008). Although these charts are not directly related to the economy, the point is that information is being represented vis-à-vis more mathematically-oriented visual aids. None of the other newspapers' articles included any visual representations of data. Thus, with a much higher regard for economically-related stories, background, context, statistics, and charts, the economic frame of *The Wall Street Journal* is clear.

The Moscow Times, on the other hand, uses a local frame and focuses on the implications of events for Russians today. It includes more obscure stories about events that are not as critical to the election and are therefore not covered in American news sources. This Russian newspaper also provides more details about the election, while at the same time, uses simple sentence structure and fewer quotes. Part of what makes this newspaper's frame local, is that it includes articles about events that are smaller-scale and not reported internationally. The story of governors attempting to get votes for Medvedev was ignored by *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, as was the article discussing the reasons why an activist of Gary Kasparov's 'Other Russia' party was committed to a mental ward (Twickel, 2008; Nowak, 2008). These events are less important to international news sources because they merely present peripheral stories that may not be at the center of election politics. Whereas to those actually living in Russia who may be directly affected by any event that occurs, less central matters are also of

interest and high concern. Based in Russia and focused mainly on Russian news, *The Moscow Times*, unlike Western media sources, has more room to include articles about a greater number and greater diversity of events taking place in the country. Its readers also expect and desire more detailed coverage of what is happening in their backyard, regardless of how narrow the scopes of these stories might be.

When a foreign newspaper talks about an issue that *The Moscow Times* also covers, some pieces of the story may not be present. For example, the American newspapers, *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, both include articles discussing the campaign plans of Medvedev. However, *The Moscow Times* presents this issue not in broad terms, but by stating that “Medvedev was expected to embark on the campaign trail...with a tour of the Murmansk region, but instead he met with a mother credited with giving birth to Moscow’s 100,000th baby in 2007 (Twickel, 2008).” Although knowledge of these individual facts is not integral to being informed about the Russian election, these details do offer a more personalized account of current events than do the Western news sources. This example further demonstrates the local frame employed by most of the articles in *The Moscow Times*. Although some quotes are present, many of the articles have statements about people being unavailable for comment or declining to do so (*The Moscow Times*). By focusing on local events not reported by American newspapers and providing more details about current events surrounding the election in Russia, this newspaper uses a local frame.

The implications of the different newspapers’ frames are mainly evident when looking at what view of the election people would have if they only read one of these papers. Due to the prevalence of the frame of Putin’s control over the elections in each newspaper, it is clear that no matter which source one reads, one will view the election process and outcome as in his hands.

However, if one were only to look at *The New York Times* as a source of news, one would also gain a concrete knowledge and vivid picture of the current events of the election but might have a decreased understanding of some of the reasons why certain actions occurred. If only reading *The Wall Street Journal*, one would probably deduce that the foremost important issues of the election are economic and would develop an in-depth understanding of many events relating to the economy, yet one might come to regard non-economic issues as less significant in the election. A reader of only *The Moscow Times* would most-likely note the specific, local stories and Russian events and develop a detailed view of the election on a more personal level. However, one might not have an outside or international perspective on the issues and the low number of quotes might also lead one to view this source as less credible.

Overall, the fact that reading different newspapers alters one's interpretation of events and stories presents an alarming issue. Because people cannot possibly read every newspaper in the world to develop an un-bias view or travel to the site of every event covered, news producers are charged with a great responsibility. By how they frame the news of the world, they shape peoples' opinions and viewpoints. Thus, the way in which people interpret the world is in the hands of the news producers. If the news is manipulated in an irresponsible manner, people's entire perspectives and attitudes could be shifted in a negative way. This can be very detrimental because everything from how a person votes to the actions he or she takes is based on his or her beliefs. For the sake of everyone worldwide, hopefully those with the authority to shape the thoughts of people across the world through framing the news do not abuse their power.

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