9-22-2017

Shaping Views: A News Frame Analysis of South Korean Newspaper Articles on North Korean Defectors

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As the future of North Korea remains uncertain, South Korea’s constitutional recognition of North Korean defectors as South Korean nationals becomes increasingly relevant. Does South Korean newspaper coverage of North Korean defector-related issues include a positive tone, indicating an effort or intent to help, or a negative tone, indicating an intent to withhold help? How frequently is the conflict frame used in reporting of North Korean defector-related issues? In this study, 165 Korean-language newspaper articles were analyzed using a quantitative coding scheme. The material was published over a one-year period from 2016 to 2017 by three South Korean newspapers that represent conservative, economic, and progressive views. While a neutral tone was observed most frequently, a positive tone was observed significantly more than a negative tone. Out of five major news frames, the conflict frame was the most common frame, followed by the attribution of responsibility frame. Based on the theory that newspapers are a major shaper of public opinion, these findings provide valuable insight into the contrasting tones and frames that characterize the reporting of North Korean defectors in South Korea.

Under the South Korean Constitution, North Korean defectors are also recognized as South Korean nationals (see Wolman, 2012). This is increasingly relevant as North Korean provocations escalate and a flow of North Korean defectors entering South Korea persists. From 2006 to 2016, South Korea has welcomed between 1,276 and 2,914 North Korean defectors per year (Republic of Korea Ministry of Unification, 2016). The influx of North Koreans arriving in the South has steadily declined since 2009, but rebounded with an increase of 11% in 2016 (Republic of Korea Ministry of Unification, 2016). The increase was accompanied by the defection of North Korean diplomat Thae Yong-ho to South Korea in August 2016. Since December 2016, Yong-ho has drawn attention to the plight of North Korean defectors as he discussed his defection with the media (Pearson, 2017). Covering news that ranges from high-profile defections to the ebb and flow of North Korean defector patterns, South Korean newspapers present this issue in varying ways to their audiences.

I was born and raised in Mānoa and concurrently majored in Korean and Communications at UHM. I began this research under the guidance of Professor Ji Young Kim while interning in Washington D.C. through the Mānoa Political Internship Program. While drafting my research proposal, I struggled to find a unique topic relevant to both of my majors. Under the mentorship of policy advisors in the office of Senator Brian Schatz, I learned to examine issues that are simmering today which may be big problems in the future. Applying that mindset, I decided to focus my study on how North Korean defectors are portrayed by South Korean news media. In the future, I hope to influence positive outcomes in U.S. foreign policy through research and diplomacy.
South Korea has experienced an influx of multicultural migrants since the 1990s (Park, 2014). By analyzing press media’s portrayal of immigrants, scholars suggested that the media can influence public opinion about immigrant workers (Park, 2014; Tunon & Baruah, 2012). Hundt (2016) also analyzed newspapers in Korea to examine how media shapes public opinion about immigrants and immigration. However, these studies did not focus on the framing of North Korean defectors, a diaspora in South Korea that is uniquely native and foreign.

This paper focuses on South Korean newspapers’ portrayal of North Korean defectors and the issues related to them through an analysis of 165 Korean-language articles from three mainstream South Korean newspapers that represent conservative, economic, and progressive perspectives. The analysis aims to examine the tone and the frames used in the news coverage of the North Korean defectors.

Literature Review

News frames

In the field of communications, scholars have studied news media frames to understand the themes that are employed when an issue is explained (i.e., Entman, 1993; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Themes hold significance because the way a story is portrayed in news media tends to influence the way its readers perceive the issue (Entman, 1993). An example can be drawn from research on the media coverage of Latin American immigrants near the U.S.–Mexico border (Branton & Dunaway, 2009). Branton and Dunaway (2009) also explored how the geographic proximity of the news organizations to the U.S.-Mexico border influenced the media frames used in news coverage of immigrants.

Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) have identified five news frames. These frames were identified by building upon previous news framing research by Neuman, Just, and Crigler (1992), who identified frames used by the audience when discussing current affairs: Conflict, human interest, attribution of responsibility, morality, and economic consequences (p. 99). De Vreese (2005, p. 56) described the five frames in the following way:

The conflict frame emphasizes conflict between individuals, groups, institutions or countries. The human interest frame brings a human face, an individual’s story, or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue or problem. The attribution of responsibility frame presents an issue or problem in such a way as to attribute responsibility for causing or solving to either the government or to an individual or group. The morality frame interprets an event or issue in the context of religious tenets or moral prescriptions. Finally, the economic consequences frame, presents an event, problem or issue in terms of the economic consequences it will have on an individual, group, institution, region, or country (p. 56).

Among these frames, De Vreese, Peter, and Semetko (2001) found that journalists were usually more interested in the conflict frame for political or economic reporting. The importance of conflict has been further highlighted by literature surrounding news values as a key component of the news selection process (e.g., Bennett, 1996; McManus, 1994; Price & Tewksbury, 1997). De Vreese (2004) demonstrated that conflict and economic consequence frames both have an ability to influence the way audiences think about political events. Moreover, news frames—emphasizing either positive or negative aspects of a topic—can influence public support for political issues or policies (De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2003). Synthesizing prior findings, this study set out to analyze the prevalence of each of the five news frames and lead tones in the material.

Media selection

While several previous research studies found supportive evidence of news frames’ effects on public opinion, it is also important to consider organizational influence in the process such as proximity or an editorial board (i.e., Branton & Dunaway, 2009; Van Dijk, 1991). Furthermore, audiences have more choices than ever in today’s media environment and this selective exposure results in curated content that tends to affirm audiences’ pre-existing opinions or beliefs (Prior, 2007; Stroud, 2011; Wojcieszak, 2008). To account for differences in media discourses, the material for this study was gathered from three mainstream South Korean newspapers of varying perspectives: Chosun Ilbo (The Chosun Daily), Maeil Kyeongjae (Maeil Economy), and Hankyoreh (Hankyoreh News). Chosun Ilbo
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is widely known for its conservative tone. *Maeil Kyeongjae* is categorized as economic and *Hankyoreh* has a reputation as a leading progressive newspaper (Yun, Ku, Park, & Han, 2012).

**Hypotheses**

This study analyzes daily newspaper articles in South Korea to determine the frames and tones that were most frequently used in the reporting of North Korean defector-related issues. Particularly, the following hypotheses were proposed:

H1: Among the five generic news frames, the conflict frame is the most common frame across all three South Korean newspapers in their reporting of North Korean defector-related issues.

H2: A positive tone, indicating an effort or intent to help North Korean defectors, is the most common tone across all three South Korean newspapers in their reporting of North Korean defector-related issues.

**Method**

**Sample**

To analyze the frames used in North Korean defector-related coverage, Korean-language articles were drawn from three mainstream South Korean daily newspapers: *Chosun Ilbo* (conservative), *Maeil Kyeongjae* (economic), and *Hankyoreh* (progressive) (Yun, Ku, Park, & Han, 2012). The year 2016 was highlighted by the defection of North Korean diplomat, Thae Yong-ho, and the first uptick in North Korean defectors entering South Korea since 2009 (Republic of Korea Ministry of Unification, 2016). Focusing on those events, newspaper articles published over a one-year period from February 15, 2016 to February 16, 2017 were selected for this study. The Korean term for North Korean defector, (탈북자, talbukja), was used as the sole keyword when searching through the websites of each respective newspaper. Articles from all sections of the newspaper were included in the search results. For each newspaper outlet, 30% of the news articles published within the period were selected, excluding any irrelevant material. A total of 165 articles were collected: 44 from *Maeil Kyeongjae*, 72 from *Chosun Ilbo*, and 49 from *Hankyoreh*.

**Coding**

A quantitative coding scheme was used to conduct the news frame analysis. All articles were coded to evaluate a list of variables. The coding categories for this study were created after reviewing research about framing theory and news frames (De Vreese, 2005). The coding sheet included the following categories: Name of the newspaper, section of the newspaper, article type, headline focus, lead tone, main topic, the presence/absence of each of the five news frames, and the description of the defectors (see Appendix).

Prior to analyzing all 165 articles, two coders (one was a native Korean speaker) tested their reliability by coding 20% of the total sample (33 articles) on separate sheets. The two sets of results were compared to check the percentage of reliability. Based on the strength of that score (percentage agreement: 0.85), the study proceeded for the remaining 80% of the sample (132 articles). As each article was read, the coder identified frames by comparing the content of the article with the frames on the coding sheet. The coder marked the presence or absence of frames in each category and had the ability to mark more than one category for each article. The lead tone of each article was noted as either being positive, reflecting an effort or intention to help North Korean defectors, neutral, or negative, reflecting an intention to withhold help.

**Results**

The first hypothesis proposed that among the five generic news frames, the conflict frame is the most visible frame across all three South Korean newspapers in their reporting of North Korean defector-related issues. Figure 1 divides the news frame analysis results by frame category and presents each newspaper’s aggregate use of a frame as one section in a stacked column. The conflict frame was the most prevalent frame, being present in 55% of the articles. This finding supported H1. Moreover, the attribution of responsibility frame was the second most prevalent frame, found in 45% of all articles. The following frames in descending prevalence were morality (33%), human interest (28%), and economic consequence (8%). The economic consequence frame was not found in any of the *Hankyoreh* news articles.

Results also indicated that *Maeil Kyeongjae* used all five frames relatively evenly across their coverage. Their
most frequently detected frame, conflict, was present in 47% of their articles. Their least frequently detected frame, economic consequence, was present in only 16% of their articles. In comparison, Chosun Ilbo also utilized all five frames in their reporting, but with greater polarization. The conflict frame was present in 46% of their articles while the economic consequence frame was only present in 10%. Although the economic consequence frame was not present in any Hankyoreh articles, Hankyoreh’s use of the conflict frame (76%) was higher than both Maeil Kyeongjae (48%) and Chosun Ilbo (46%).

The third most frequently detected frame, morality, was more prevalent in Chosun Ilbo articles (43%) than its prevalence in both Hankyoreh (27%) and Maeil Kyeongjae (27%) articles. A similar case is seen with the responsibility frame. The frequency of Hankyoreh articles with the attribution of responsibility frame totaled 73% while Chosun Ilbo and Maeil Kyeongjae articles with the same frame totaled 32% and 34%, respectively.

The second hypothesis proposed that the tone toward the North Korean defectors is positive across all three newspapers, indicating an effort or intent to help North Korean defectors. Figure 2 divides the lead tone results by newspaper and further organizes the frequency of each tone as a portion of a 100% stacked bar. A neutral tone was the most frequently detected lead tone among articles from all three newspapers, followed by positive tones, and negative tones, respectively. This finding did not support H2. Hankyoreh did not have any articles with a negative tone, while Chosun Ilbo had the highest percentage of articles with a negative tone. Maeil Kyeongjae saw greater disparity in its results with the lowest percentage of positive tone articles and the highest percentage of neutral tone articles among the three papers.
**Discussion**

The media analysis of the frames and tones present in a sample of 165 Korean-language articles from three mainstream South Korean daily newspapers found that the conflict frame occurred the most frequently in all three newspapers followed by the attribution of responsibility frame. This result supported H1. Furthermore, the results showed that for each newspaper, the most frequent tone was neutral. This finding did not support the H2.

**Frames**

The analysis supports prior findings by De Vreese (2005) which claim that for political or economic news, journalists tended to emphasize conflict. The literature that characterized conflict as a key component of the news selection process (e.g., Bennett, 1996; McManus, 1994; Price & Tewksbury, 1997) was supported as well. The relatively low use of the economic consequence frame demonstrates that South Korean newspaper journalists tend not to present North Korean defector-related issues in terms of the economic consequences it will have on an individual, group, institution, region or country. The two most frequent frames, conflict and attribution of responsibility, were more frequently associated with each other than others, demonstrating that conflict frames tended to occur with an attribution of responsibility for causing or solving the issue to the government or an entity. The third most frequent frame was morality, followed by human interest. This demonstrates that the North Korean defector-related issues tended to be portrayed in the context of religious tenets or moral prescriptions more frequently than as a human face or an individual’s story.

**Tone**

An analysis of each article’s lead tone concluded that the majority of the articles had a neutral tone, reflecting neither an intention to help North Korean defectors nor an intent to withhold support. This holds significance because of previous research into inherent valence. De Vreese and Boomgaarden (2003) found that emphasizing positive or negative aspects of an issue can affect public support for policies. The low percentage of articles with a negative tone demonstrates that South Korean newspapers tend to include either a neutral or positive tone in their reporting of North Korean defector-related issues. These findings have practical implications for the South Korean government because newspapers can influence public support of North Korean defector-related policies.

**Political polarity**

Previous research argued that today’s media environment allows for curated exposure to media outlets that affirm our beliefs (Prior, 2007; Stroud, 2011; Wojcieszak, 2008). The results in the study showed some differences among the three news organizations in the reporting of North Korean defector-related issues (see Figures 1 and 2). For example, audiences who restrict themselves to Hankyoreh news articles may be less exposed to coverage of North Korean defector-related issues that include an economic consequence frame. The findings also demonstrate that audiences who are only exposed to Chosun Ilbo articles may be more exposed to human interest frames. Considering these differences in retrospect, it was prudent to select a diverse sample from three mainstream newspapers that accounted for conservative, economic, and progressive views.

**Limitations and future study**

There are some limitations to this study. The first limitation is that among the two coders, only one was a native Korean speaker. The second coder has general working proficiency in Korean. To compensate for this, a small sample was coded separately by each individual and the reliability score was checked before the rest of the sample was coded. Checking percentage agreement is not a strong method, hence rendering this aspect a limitation. The second limitation of this study is the size of the sample, specifically the short period of one year. A sample of articles that were published over a longer period could have resulted in data that more accurately reflected the framing of North Korean defector-related issues by South Korean newspapers.

This study strives to test and build upon the existing research on news framing while adding unique data sets to the literature on South Korean press media’s portrayal of North Korean defector-related issues. Researchers can modify this study to analyze the influence of news frames on South Korea’s public opinion of North Korean
defectors. Furthermore, research can be expanded to analyze fake news and online media messages which tend to be less filtered and may have a more potent impact on public opinion.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Ji Young Kim, Professor in the School of Communications at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa (UHM), for her wisdom and guidance through this research process. I am also thankful to Jaden Insung Choi, a Korean friend who attended UHM as an exchange student, for helping me code all the articles under tight deadlines.

References

## Appendix

### Coding sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VARIABLE NAME</th>
<th>VARIABLE LABEL</th>
<th>VARIABLE DATA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CODER NAME</td>
<td>Name of person coding</td>
<td>1=Keoni 2=Jaden (인성)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NUMBER</td>
<td>Number of article being coded</td>
<td>1–999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DATE</td>
<td>Date information was published</td>
<td>mm/dd/yy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOURCE</td>
<td>The story's publishing newspaper</td>
<td>1=Chosun Ilbo (조선일보) 2=Hankyoreh (한겨례) 3=Maeil Kyeongje (매일경제)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOURCE CATEGORY</td>
<td>Which section of the newspaper the article is found in.</td>
<td>1=Politics (정치) 2=Society (사회) 3=North Korea (북한) 4=Sports (스포츠) 5=Opinion (칼럼/사설) 6=World/International (국제) 7=Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STORY</td>
<td>Story type</td>
<td>1=Column/Opinion (칼럼/사설) 2=News article (기사) 3=Exclusive (단독) 4=Photo article (포토) 5=Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LENGTH</td>
<td>Length (word count)</td>
<td>0000–9999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HFOCUS</td>
<td>Headline Focus</td>
<td>1=North Korean Defectors (general topic) 2=Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LTONE</td>
<td>Lead tone (The tone refers to whether the language in the article reflects an effort or intention to help North Korean defectors.)</td>
<td>1=Negative (부정적) 2=Positive (긍정적) 3=Neutral (중립적)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAIN TOPIC</td>
<td>Body focus (What the article is discussing or announcing)</td>
<td>1=Individual level issues (defectors) (탈북자) 2=Economic issues (경제) 3=Political issues (정치) 4=Unification issues (통일) 5=Government relations (정부) 6=Social integration issues (사회통합) 7=Human rights issues (인권) 8=Illegal drug issues (마약/필로폰) 9=Expert analysis (전문가 의견/분석/예측) 10=Spy (간첩) 11=Other 12=War/Terror/Military/Provation/Nuclear (도발/전쟁/해/군대) 13=Donation (기부/지원) 14=Analysis of N. Korean defector outflow (탈북 현황) 15=North Korean sanctions (대북제재) 16=N. Korean defector law (탈북자와 관련된 제판 결과)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VARIABLE NAME</td>
<td>VARIABLE LABEL</td>
<td>VARIABLE DATA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| CONFLICT FRAME       | The conflict frame emphasizes conflict between individuals, groups, institutions or countries. | 1=Present (있음)  
                        | 2=Absent (없음)                                                            |
| HUMAN INTEREST FRAME | The human interest frame brings a human face, an individual’s story, or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue or problem. | 1=Present (있음)  
                        | 2=Absent (없음)                                                            |
| ATTRIBUTION OF RESPONSIBILITY FRAME | The attribution of responsibility frame presents an issue or problem in such a way as to attribute responsibility for causing or solving to either the government or to an individual or group. | 1=Present (있음)  
                        | 2=Absent (없음)                                                            |
| MORALITY FRAME       | The morality frame interprets an event or issue in the context of religious tenets or moral prescriptions. | 1=Present (있음)  
                        | 2=Absent (없음)                                                            |
| ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCE FRAME | The economic consequences frame, presents an event, problem or issue in terms of the economic consequences it will have on an individual, group, institution, region or country. | 1=Present (있음)  
                        | 2=Absent (없음)                                                            |
| DEFECTOR DESCRIPTION | How the North Korean defector is described in the material.                    | 1=Defector (탈북자/세터민/등)  
                        | 2=Unemployed (실업자)                                                      
                        | 3=Employee (직원)                                                          
                        | 4=Illegal worker (불법 취업자)                                               
                        | 5=Student (학생)                                                             
                        | 6=Government official (공무원)                                              
                        | 7=Celebrity (연예인)                                                        
                        | 8=Teacher (선생님)                                                          
                        | 9=Victim of abuse (피해자)                                                  
                        | 10=Author (필자)                                                           
                        | 11=Other                                                                   
                        | 12=Criminal (범죄자, 살인, 마약판매 등)                                       
                        | 13=Spy (간첩)                                                              |