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# Media Framing of the Coronavirus in Croatia

## **Abstract**

*Media framing is a method through which the media frame news into familiar narratives which correspond to the unconscious layers of our psyche. The media tend to overemphasize certain aspects of events, all the while in a Procrustean fashion ignoring those aspects that do not fit into the selected narrative frame (Kunczik and Zipfel, 1998: 103). Media framing relies on storytelling, and theorists note that master narratives selected from myths, fairy tales and dreams, largely reinforce the manipulative effects of media framing (Kent, 2015). This paper examines how Croatian print media framed the news on the coronavirus in the period between the first introduction of social distancing measures (19 March 2020) and relaxation of the measures (27 April 2020). Preliminary research points to the use of the following master narratives: overcoming the monster, rags to riches, the quest, tragedy as punishment for egoism and arrogance, rebirth. In addition, prominent members of the National Crisis Headquarters were framed within the hero archetype. The use of these master narratives in media framing of the corona crisis during the so-called first wave of the epidemic, clearly indicates the intention of propaganda and manipulation.*

**Key words:** *media framing, storytelling, master narrative, corona crisis, propaganda.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 2020 the world was for the most part affected by the pandemic caused by a new virus in the coronavirus family, known officially as SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19), shortened in everyday communication to COVID-19. Scientific research so far reveals that SARS-CoV-2 relates to a zoonosis, i.e. an infectious disease common to humans and certain animal species, that can be transferred from animals to humans and vice versa. Both domestic and wild animals may be sources for the spread of zoonoses. The phenomenon known as a “spillover event” is the transmission of a virus from one species of host to another, and it is believed that this transfer may have been the starting point for the new SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus.<sup>69</sup> Scientists believe that the new virus is similar to coronaviruses present in some species of bats in the *Rhinolophus* family which act as possible natural reservoirs of infection. These bats are common in South China and all over Asia, in the Middle East, Africa and Europe. Bats are often viral reservoirs since they tend to gather in great numbers in one place to rest or hibernate. However, due to the different receptors the viruses use to enter cells, scientists note there is a possibility that before it “spilled over” to humans, the virus was transferred to bats through another intermediary, perhaps, it is supposed, through a wild animal traded on the Wuhan wet markets. This practice increases the risk of pandemics with health, social and economic effects on all the communities involved.<sup>70</sup> The possibility that the source of the new virus is a bat, an animal which has quite negative cultural and religious connotations in the western cultural sphere (unlike the eastern sphere)<sup>71</sup> has caused a media hysteria which spilled over to real life, that is, into the mass killing of bats. Given the fact that bats are quite useful animals, extremely important for the preservation of biodiversity (they help in the natural regeneration of tropical forests, pollinate a range of night blooming plants, control the number of insects active during the night and serve as indicators for the health of the environment), and that many bat species are included on the lists of endangered species,<sup>72</sup> after a couple of months governments of numerous countries did react and launched awareness-raising campaigns with the aim of stopping various misconceptions about bats. Even before this pandemic that drastically changed people’s lives, bats were among the animals that were often hounded which is why the shifting of responsibility onto someone else through propaganda, in this case, onto another animal species, found fertile ground. This efficiently turned the attention away from the real problems related to this crisis, in other words, the systematic destruction of the environment perpetrated by humans. Bats were not the cause of this crisis, but rather the destruction of ecosystems by the human race. Natural ecosystems play a fundamental role in regulating the transmission and spread of infectious diseases such as

69 Barney Jeffries, “The Loss of Nature and the Rise of Pandemics”, [https://d2ouvy59p0dg6k.cloudfront.net/downloads/the\\_loss\\_of\\_nature\\_and\\_rise\\_of\\_pandemics\\_\\_\\_protecting\\_human\\_and\\_planetary\\_health.pdf](https://d2ouvy59p0dg6k.cloudfront.net/downloads/the_loss_of_nature_and_rise_of_pandemics___protecting_human_and_planetary_health.pdf); Accessed: 9 December 2020.

70 Ibid.

71 Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *Rječnik simbola* (Dictionary of Symbols), Nakladni zavod Matice Hrvatske, Zagreb 1989, pp. 677-679

72 State Institute for Nature Protection, Bats, <http://www.haop.hr/hr/tematska-podrucja/prirodne-vrijednosti-stanje-i-ocuvanje/bioraznolikost/sismisi>; Accessed: 9 December 2020.

zoonoses, which means they are vital in maintaining and nurturing life on Earth, including the life of the human species. Scientists are aware that important factors such as the loss of habitat, creation of artificial environments, wildlife trade and the destruction of biodiversity in general, contribute to the spread of viral diseases.<sup>73</sup> People however, rarely like to change their habits and way of life, so it is much easier to put the responsibility on someone else. This is a very effective propaganda method of *labelling* the enemy which aims to stimulate prejudice of the general public towards a group or individual, exploiting fear, hatred, contempt or any other negative feeling. In the labelling technique, the compliance of the public to a certain idea is implemented through exploiting the appeal of fear. The devastating effects of exploiting this propaganda technique are familiar from Nazi propaganda which identified the Jews as enemies and sources of all problems in 1930s Germany.<sup>74</sup> This propaganda technique successfully turns the attention of the public away from important social problems and issues, so that those in charge do not have to deal with addressing them. Propagandists find it much easier to wipe out a whole species than to change the types of behaviour that led to the crisis. In addition to labelling bats as the main enemy, a quite common narrative in the media (new media in particular) during the first half of 2020 and the first wave of the pandemic, was the narrative of the “dirty Chinese” as enemies who would “eat anything that flies, crawls, walks, slithers or swims”, and this narrative was also sometimes communicated by Donald Trump, the U.S. president during this period<sup>75</sup>. In the first wave of the pandemic as he failed to manage the crisis, he found it politically opportune to turn the attention of the American public away from the inadequacy of the administration to the “real culprit” – the Chinese enemy.

However, labelling, also known as *name-calling*<sup>76</sup>, is not the only propaganda method used in foreign and local media by representatives of the government in order to shift the attention of the public and use the crisis for gaining political points. A great number of propaganda techniques dating to the period before World War II has also been used, such as *glittering generalities* through which individuals (for e.g., representatives of the National Crisis Headquarters) were linked to universal human values thus creating the framework for the acceptance and support for their statements without examination of the evidence. The so-called *transfer* technique was also often used, in which positive attributes of some universal and national symbols are transferred to individuals, as well as *testimonials*, where statements by individuals holding a position of authority in the public or even by innocent children, are purposefully shared with the public, in order to ensure the uncritical acceptance of all ideas, measures and attitudes by representatives of the Crisis Headquarters. The technique known as *plain folks* was also used, a method in which the speaker tries to convince the audience that his/her ideas are good because they are rooted in common sense, are self-explanatory,

73 Barney Jeffries, “The Loss of Nature and the Rise of Pandemics”.

74 Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion, Fifth Edition*, SAGE, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC 2012, p. 240.

75 *Donald Trump Tweets Describing Coronavirus As “A Very Bad ‘Gift’ From China”*, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/trump-tweets-describing-coronavirus-as-a-very-bad-gift-from-china-2236813>; Accessed: 9 December 2020.

76 Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion, Fifth Edition*, p. 237.

close to the common people, and the speaker is also one of the people. During the first wave of the corona crisis, the Crisis Headquarters and members of the Government made wide use of the *card stacking* technique which included offering selective information that support the proposed measures and ideas. The *bandwagon* technique was also used, manipulating the conformism of people who like to belong to socially accepted groups under the banner “everybody’s doing it!” thus convincing citizens to follow the Headquarters’ measures and hop on this “bandwagon”, so that the “parade” would not leave the station without them.<sup>77</sup> Given the fact that media framing entails the creation of quite a selective interpretation frame for presenting very complex information and social phenomena, it is manipulative in itself and corresponds to propaganda intentions related to hidden, often ideological, interests.

This paper deals with media framing of the coronavirus in Croatia, and the work consists of four parts: Introduction, The theory of media framing and propaganda, Analysis of media framing of the coronavirus in Croatia and finally, the Conclusion. Following the introductory section in which the subject matter is placed within a situational frame, the second part presents the media framing phenomenon and how it relates to propaganda. Given the fact that media framing largely relies on stories and storytelling, the first section also presents manipulation with so-called master myths in media framing and research results on media manipulation of the pandemic theme from other countries. The third part presents a case study of media framing of the coronavirus in Croatia using examples of master narratives used for presenting this subject in Croatian media. This paper explores the way in which Croatian print media have framed the news on the coronavirus in the period from first introducing social distancing measures (19 March 2020) to relaxing the measures (27 April 2020). The unit of analysis are thematically selected media articles which illustrate master narratives (overcoming the monster, rags to riches, the quest, tragedy as punishment for egoism and arrogance, rebirth, the hero archetype) used for media framing of the coronavirus. The articles have been analysed using the qualitative research method of narrative analysis according to the matrix created by Gillespie and Toynbee. The final part of the paper offers research conclusions and recommendations.

## 2. THE THEORY OF MEDIA FRAMING AND PROPAGANDA

According to Sproule, propaganda “represents the work of large organizations or groups to win over the public for special interests through a massive orchestration of attractive conclusions packaged to conceal both their persuasive purpose and lack of sound supporting reasons”.<sup>78</sup> Jowett and O’Donnell emphasize that the use of propaganda includes purposefulness, which is why it is related to control and considered to be an intentional effort to change or maintain the balance of power useful to the propagandist. In their view, the purposeful effort by propagandists is usually related to a clear

<sup>77</sup> Alfred M. Lee and Elizabeth B. Lee, *The fine art of propaganda*. International Society for General Semantics, San Francisco 1979.

<sup>78</sup> J. Michael Sproule, *Channels of Propaganda*. Edinfo, Bloomington 1994, p. 8.

institutional ideology and goal since the purpose of propaganda is to share a particular ideology with the public.<sup>79</sup> The aim of using propaganda methods through mass media is the “systematic and conscious promotion of a set of ideas and actions developed by those advocating for such a doctrine and having use of it”.<sup>80</sup> Although propaganda from opposing groups is perceived as negative and is easily identified as propaganda, the ideology of one’s own group is not perceived as either good or bad.<sup>81</sup> Propagandists promote the manufacture of consent in the public through “appealing to feelings, using insecurities, capitalizing on the ambiguities of language and inverting the rules of logic”.<sup>82</sup> Herman and Chomsky see a strong link between propaganda and media framing since the purpose of media is to serve the needs and interests of the elite which to a large extent benefits from policies related to neoliberal economy. According to Herman and Chomsky, the media fulfil this purpose precisely by framing the news.<sup>83</sup> Car emphasizes the particular importance of how journalists select their information because “if the media do not report about it – it might as well not have happened”, and “what they do report about – continues to be retold and shared in relation to the media discourse which has imposed an appropriate perspective onto this event or issue, as well as the frame within which we as the general public should understand the event or issue, continue discussing it, or merely accept it as fact”, which happens, “regardless of whether this is relevant, verified or true”.<sup>84</sup>

Tankard warns that the media frame may eliminate certain voices or weaken arguments because the media may frame some questions and phenomena in a way that is beneficial only to one side, without explicitly showing bias. According to Tankard, the process of defining rules of debate to a large extent supports the manufacture of consent for a chosen ideological position.<sup>85</sup> Hackett noted that analysing media framing may reveal background interests which impact the way in which the media address a certain topic or phenomenon. Framing is a more sophisticated concept than the concept of media bias, it goes beyond the “for or against” approach or the distinction between positive and negative, as it enables much more complex emotional as well as cognitive responses by determining the horizon of a particular media debate. Media framing is an important instrument of propaganda because it can influence the media public, even to the point of completely turning public

79 Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion, Fifth Edition*, p. 3.

80 Eileen Gambrill and Amanda Reiman, “A Propaganda Index for Reviewing Problem Framing in Articles and Manuscripts: An Exploratory Study”, *Plus One* 6 (5/2011), p. 7.

81 Deepa Kumar, “Media, War, and Propaganda: Strategies of Information Management during the 2003 Iraq War”, *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 3 (1/2012), pp. 48-69.

82 Eileen Gambrill and Amanda Reiman, “A Propaganda Index for Reviewing Problem Framing in Articles and Manuscripts: An Exploratory Study”, p. 8.

83 Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. Pantheon Books. New York 1988.

84 Viktorija Car, *Mi i oni kroz medijske naočale. (Us and Them Through the Media Lens)* ACT Printlab. Zagreb-Belgrade-Sarajevo 2015, p. 7.

85 James W. Tankard, “The Empirical Approach to the Study of Media Framing”, in: Stephen D. Reese, O. Gandy, and A. E. Grant, *Framing Public Life: Perspectives on Media and Our Understanding of the Social World*, Routledge, New York 2001, p. 95.

opinion by changing the media frame within which a certain phenomenon is presented.<sup>86</sup> The theory of media framing approaches the media text through its interpretative frame as “the central idea that organizes news content by providing it with context” through shaping, editing and presenting news that consciously or unconsciously put information within a certain interpretation frame.<sup>87</sup> According to media framing theory, the journalistic choice of news items uses an interpretation frame in order to select and process information, anchoring it in already memorized data/experiences and in interpretations of new events on the basis of these categorized, organized and interpreted life experiences with additional meaning. Framing selects, processes and interprets in such a way that it emphasizes certain aspects of reality, while ignoring or neglecting other aspects. This process may happen consciously or unconsciously, and does not relate only to the way journalists choose the news, but also how they impact the public, since the public uses existing interpretation frames and develops new ones. In framing, journalists emphasize those aspects of a phenomenon that support the crucial building blocks of interpretation frames.<sup>88</sup> Early developments of media framing theory were mainly influenced by Goffman’s metaphorical concept of frame as a part of the picture (*strip*) which means narrowing down an event or phenomenon to one strip around which a framework can then be built, i.e., the dominant narrative which largely impacts the way in which the phenomenon is to be interpreted as a whole. This concept is followed by the concept of *setting the tone* which guides the total impression of a phenomenon, while the third frame concept emphasizes the frame as the main idea around which the media narrative is built as a whole.<sup>89</sup> Within media framing, Gamson and Modigliani developed the theory of media packaging. A media package can be recognized through key words and the use of phrases that point to a particular media frame. In addition to this approach, the media framing theory also developed the idea of framing as a multidimensional concept according to which a media frame is impacted by a whole range of factors including the journalist’s gender, the publication source, the choice of words in presenting opposing views etc.<sup>90</sup> Shoemaker and Reese note that the dominant, elite and journalistic ideology may all influence how the news is framed. The dominant ideology is the one that takes for granted the majority worldview of a particular society. Elite ideology is the ideology of the ruling political elite and it usually corresponds to the dominant ideology. Shoemaker and Reese emphasize that elite ideology is the main factor in media framing. Journalistic ideology is related to media routine and values of professional journalism.<sup>91</sup>

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86 Ibid, p. 96.

87 Viktorija Car, *Mi i oni kroz medijske naočale*. ACT Printlab. Zagreb-Beograd-Sarajevo 2015, p. 7.

88 Michael Kunczik and Astrid Zipfel, *Uvod u znanost o medijima i komunikologiju* (Introduction to Media Science and Communicology), Zaklada Friedrich Ebert, Zagreb 2006, pp. 147-149.

89 James W. Tankard, “The Empirical Approach to the Study of Media Framing”, p. 98.

90 Ibid, p. 99.

91 Pamela J. Shoemaker and Stephen D. Reese, S. *Mediating the Message: Theories of Influences on Media Content*. Longman. New York 1996, p. 234.

It should be noted that there is no agreement in communication theory on media framing theory/theories. Some theorists do not see media framing theories as empirically confirmed<sup>92</sup> but it is extremely difficult to implement principles of empirical evidence within social sciences in the same way they are implemented in natural and technical sciences. The media frame theory developed through observation and analyses of a corpus of media texts as well as through searching for certain correspondences and rules, that is, more or less stable patterns within existing media narratives. It should also be noted that according to some theorists, media frames are not eternal or universal, but change in line with changes in ideologies and value systems. Brosius and Eps for instance believe that new frameworks are used for extraordinary situations or new topics, thus replacing the old ones. This is particularly evident in reports on crises. After the initial information on a new crisis, the media pile up data on similar crises although this information needn't have the same level of gravity or complexity. In this way the media influence how we perceive the gravity of the crisis even though reality and facts are largely different from the reality presented in the media.<sup>93</sup>

Research in communication trends shows that storytelling is one of the most important skills for anyone working in communications professionally.<sup>94</sup> Storytelling is defined as the normative, discursive and political process of creating a story, through which a problem or source of difficulties is articulated, as well as possible solutions and way of convincing the public to agree, unite and join the process of collective action.<sup>95</sup> It entails creating a situation in a planned and selective manner so that the audience may be prepared for the future. This process takes into account the existence of multiple and potentially opposed perspectives of reality, depending on the different ambitions, interests and opinions of the general public. Storytelling is here then considered to be a promising tool in designing meaning and encouraging collective action towards a specific direction.<sup>96</sup> Media framing relies on the skill of storytelling, and theorists like Goffmann,<sup>97</sup> Tobias,<sup>98</sup> Booker,<sup>99</sup> Burke,<sup>100</sup>

92 Michael Kunczik and Astrid Zipfel, *Uvod u znanost o medijima i komunikologiju*, Zaklada Friedrich Ebert, Zagreb 2006, pp. 147-148.

93 Hans-Bernd Brosius and Peter Eps, "Verändern Schlüsselereignisse journalistische Selektionskriterien? Framing am Beispiel der Berichterstattung über Anschläge gegen Ausländer und Asylanten", in: *Rundfunk und Fernsehen* (41/1993), pp. 512-530.

94 "USC Annenberg's 2017 Global Communications Report predicts convergence of marketing and public relations", <https://annenberg.usc.edu/research/center-public-relations/news/usc-annengergs-2017-global-communications-report-predicts>; Accessed: 20 December 2020.

95 Teun A. Van Dijk, "Imagining future places: How designs co-constitute what is, and thus influence what will be". *Planning Theory* 10 (2/2011), pp. 124-143.

96 Stefan Hartman, Constanza Parra i Gert de Roo, "Framing strategic storytelling in the context of transition management to stimulate tourism destination development", *Tourism Management* 75 (2019), p. 90.

97 Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, Northeastern University Press, Boston 1986.

98 Ronald Tobias, *20 Master Plots (And How to Build Them)*. Writer's Digest Books, Cincinnati 1993.

99 Christopher Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*, Continuum, London New York 2006.

100 Kenneth Burke, *Counter-statement*. University of California Press. Berkeley 1968.

Kent<sup>101</sup> and Lule<sup>102</sup> emphasize that master narratives (or master myths as they are called by some theorists), selected from myths, fairy tales and dreams, to a large extent strengthen the manipulative effects of media framing. Lule defines a master myth as a role model or pattern, the total invisible root of consciousness.<sup>103</sup> According to Bordwell and Thompson, a narrative is any selection of causally linked events happening within a certain time and space.<sup>104</sup> Media framing is therefore a technique through which the media frames the news into narratives that correspond to universally recognizable patterns at the deepest, unconscious levels of the psyche, which can influence how the public reacts, as can be evidenced by examples of Nazi, Soviet and other totalitarian propaganda, but also modern democratic propaganda. The manipulation of such narratives however, is not guaranteed or absolute. In spite of the growing domination of global media conglomerates in the modern global media ecosystem, which has been facilitated by the increasing deregulation of rules on media monopolies,<sup>105</sup> media literacy of the public as well as the existence of different media interpretations and views in different media, to a large extent limits the propaganda effect of manipulating master narratives in media framing. The qualitative research method for analysing narratives by Gillespie and Toynbee includes the descriptive phase identifying parts of the narrative in order to examine the way in which the media text is organized, and the interpretative phase in which the meaning of narrative elements is interpreted. The focus is on analysing the ways of providing information (Information with the aim of garnering support; Positive appraisal of us; Negative appraisal of them; Emphasizing community/common participation in the topic of the statement; Emphasizing a certain perspective and/or concept of the statement (problem, solution, guilt etc.)).<sup>106</sup>

The corona crisis which has been the main theme of this year, definitely constitutes a large global crisis, and according to Brosius and Eps<sup>107</sup>, it is precisely new extraordinary situations like these that use new media frames to change the old ones. Researchers of manipulative communication styles have meticulously analysed the way in which the topic of the corona crisis has been presented in the media, as well as the way in which it corresponds to previous media presentations of epidemics. For example, Ali Haif Abbas uses Van Dijk's discourse analysis in his research to show how *The New York Times* in the U.S. and the *Global Times* in China have framed the news on the coronavirus pandemic for political and ideological purposes. The *New York Times* focused on propaganda of the Chinese Communist Party, its inability to control the spread of the epidemic, weaknesses

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101 Michael L. Kent, The Power of Storytelling in Public Relations: Understanding the 20 Master Plots. *Public Relations Review* 41 (2015), pp. 480–489.

102 Jack Lule, *Daily News, Eternal Stories. The Mythological Role of Journalism*, The Guilford Press, New York 2001.

103 Ibid.

104 David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Minding Movies: Observations on the Art, Craft, and Business of Filmmaking*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago London 2011.

105 Joseph Turow, *Mediji danas: Uvod u masovne komunikacije* (Media Today: Mass Communication in a Converging World), Clio, Belgrade 2013, pp. 346-347.

106 Marie Gillespie and Jason Toynbee, *Analysing media texts*, Open University Press / Open University, Maidenhead New York 2006.

107 Hans-Bernd Brosius and Peter Eps, "Verändern Schlüsselereignisse journalistische Selektionskriterien? Framing am Beispiel der Berichterstattung über Anschläge gegen Ausländer und Asylanten".

in controlling the virus and providing medical equipment as well as the totalitarian treatment of people and healthcare workers. The Chinese *Global Times* also focused on negative stories relating to COVID-19 in the U.S., particularly the inability of the American administration led by President Trump in fighting the new virus.<sup>108</sup> It is significant that neither of these media questioned the way in which the pandemic was managed within one's own country which confirms the thesis that framing news is mainly influenced by ideology of the elite, which is usually in line with dominant ideology. Tiffany Karalis Noel is one of the rare researchers to focus on analysing the way in which American media have encouraged xenophobia through media framing of people of Asian descent during the global COVID-19 pandemic. She notes it is necessary to question the different aspects of intercultural communication regarding public health issues.<sup>109</sup> This approach unfortunately is not the dominant model in narratives of research articles addressing the subject of media manipulation during the corona crisis, so it seems that variants of elite and dominant ideologies can be seen not only in articles for the general public but also in scientific articles dealing with this subject.

Jacob for example researched how the COVID-19 pandemic damaged the image of China as an efficient one-party Communist state due to obfuscation and late reporting on the viral epidemic. He says that China failed to adjust its communication to new circumstances, i.e. it followed traditional interests of foreign affairs and security, focusing on its power struggle with the U.S. The author believes that the Chinese Communist Party reacted with such authoritarian and restrictive responses to the pandemic in order to confirm its legitimacy.<sup>110</sup> At the same time, Jacob fails to notice the manipulative media communication on the pandemic shared by the U.S. administration. Similar conclusions are offered by Vanessa Molter and Renee DiResta who analysed English language posts on Facebook by Chinese state media regarding the coronavirus pandemic in order to gain insight into the way Chinese authorities communicate this topic to the rest of the world through using state media. They noticed these repeating frames: sharing positive stories and promoting responses to the pandemic by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), rewriting recent history in a way beneficial for the CCP during the progress of the coronavirus pandemic and using targeted adverts for sharing intended messages. They concluded this was problematic propaganda content containing misinformation and conspiracy theories. Therefore they suggest social networks should not publish paid advertisements of such harmful content.<sup>111</sup> It is a pity that this type of analysis has a clear ideological bias.

108 Ali Haif Abbas, "Politicizing the Pandemic: A Schemata Analysis of COVID-19 News in Two Selected Newspapers", *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law - Revue internationale de Sémiotique juridique*, 2020, DOI: 10.1007/s11196-020-09745-2.

109 Tiffany Karalis Noel, "Conflating culture with COVID-19: Xenophobic repercussions of a global pandemic", *Social Sciences & Humanities Open 2* (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2020.100044>.

110 Jabin T. Jacob, "'To Tell China's Story Well': China's International Messaging during the COVID-19 Pandemic", *China Report* 56, (3/2020), pp. 374-392.

111 Vanessa Molter and Renee DiResta, "Pandemics & Propaganda: How Chinese State Media Creates and Propagates CCP Coronavirus Narratives", *The Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* 1 (1/2020), Special Issue on Covid-19 and Misinformation.

Other researchers used a somewhat more objective analytical perspective to focus on communication on social networks, with particular focus on Twitter, since traditional media often report information precisely from this social network which has been confirmed as the most common source of fake news.<sup>112</sup> They concluded that sharing misinformation on social media spreads faster than the spread of COVID-19 and that misinformation can have extremely harmful consequences for people's health.<sup>113</sup>

This short review of some scientific articles examining the manipulative media communication on the pandemic, reveals the existence of very selective, ideologically biased media frameworks not only in news articles, but also in scientific texts. The use of the analytical matrix suggested by Gillespie and Toynebee reveals all the crucial elements of manipulating master narratives within the framing process:

- Providing information with the aim of gaining support;
- Positive appraisal of us;
- Negative appraisal of them;
- Emphasizing community/common participation in the pandemic theme; and
- Emphasizing a certain perspective and/or thematic concept (problem, solution, guilt etc.).

### 3. ANALYSIS OF MEDIA FRAMING OF THE CORONAVIRUS IN CROATIA

Ever since the beginning of the corona crisis, the media in Croatia have closely followed this topic. Most mainstream media in Croatia put it on their agenda (*agenda setting*) and this already makes clear how largely they influenced what the citizens of Croatia should think about, or even in what manner.<sup>114</sup> In terms of agenda setting i.e. the media agenda, this topic combines several characteristic agendas:<sup>115</sup> the media, public and political agenda, and in the autumn wave of the pandemic and the increased communication on COVID-19 vaccines, a corporate agenda also came to the fore. This intermingling of interests by different stakeholders who hold the power to set the media agenda, make this topic particularly interesting for media analysis. However, agenda setting in the context of combined interests by different stakeholders who hold the power to set an agenda (the

112 Robinson Meyer, "The Grim Conclusions of the Largest-Ever Study of Fake News", The Atlantic, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/03/largest-study-ever-fake-news-mit-twitter/555104/> Accessed: 20 December 2020.

113 Zapan Barua, Sajib Barua, Salma Aktar, Najma Kabir and Mingze Li, "Effects of misinformation on COVID-19 individual responses and recommendations for resilience of disastrous consequences of misinformation", *Progress in Disaster Science* 8 (2020), pp. 100-119.

Kris Hartley and Vu Minh Khuong, "Fighting fake news in the COVID-19 era: policy insights from an equilibrium model", *Policy Sciences* (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11077-020-09405-z>.

114 M. McCombs and D. Shaw, The agenda-setting function of the mass media, *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36 (2/1976), pp. 176-187.

115 Everett M. Rogers and James W. Dearing, "Agenda-setting research: Where has it been, where is it going?", *Annals of the International Communication Association* 11 (1/1988), pp. 555-594.

media, public interest, politics, corporations), merely provide the first manipulative layer in media presentation. Given the fact that this topic dominated the media agenda during the whole period since social distancing measures were introduced (19 March 2020) up to when they were relaxed (27 April 2020), and that it was strongly contextualized with the coming parliamentary elections, the way in which the media framed the topic in this period, points to their strong ambition to convince the citizens of Croatia how they should be thinking about this crisis, i.e. that the Government of Croatia and the National Crisis Headquarters appointed by the Government (hereinafter referred to as: Crisis Headquarters) are extremely successful in managing this extremely difficult crisis which makes Croatia one of the most successful countries in managing the pandemic – due to heroic efforts and capabilities of the Government and its satellite as represented by the Crisis Headquarters. From the beginning of the crisis, the Croatian Government was particularly aware of the fact that the way in which managing of the corona crisis is perceived in the public will be the crucial factor determining the winner of the parliamentary election. In March 2020, and without a public competition, the Government employed the company Media Val, a PR agency. In March this agency bought the domain Koronavirus.hr and started with the provision of its services to the Government. Asked by Faktograf, the only fact checking portal in Croatia, how this cooperation worth several hundred thousands kunas was actually organized, the Government stated: “The Ministry of Health organized the emergency establishment of the official website koronavirus.hr and related webpages and accounts on social media platforms – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, as well as corresponding topics on forum.hr, in order to provide regularly updated and correct information related to the COVID-19 epidemic, with the aim of protecting the lives and health of citizens of the Republic of Croatia and other persons as well as to provide them with timely information, which is considered to be among the security interests of the Republic of Croatia”.<sup>116</sup> Given this extraordinary short response by the Government, it was impossible to conclude whether these services included sharing information based on which the media framed the Government during the lockdown period, and especially select members of the Crisis Headquarters by the mentioned agency, or whether this was a consequence of activities by the Government’s i.e. institutional public relations which also points to the use of state resources for party interests. However, the fact that these were created and not spontaneous narratives is clear from the great similarity of various content published in different media during this period.

In accordance with the thesis by Brosius and Eps that emergency situations use new frameworks which supplant the old ones, it should be noted that in the beginning of the corona crisis, the media in Croatia made comparisons to previous crises caused by viruses. The webpage telegram.hr for example explains in an article dated 20 April,<sup>117</sup> why the world had to stop due to COVID-19,

116 Ana Brakus, “Vlada skriva tko je odlučio zaobići javnu nabavu i platiti PR agenciji pola milijuna kuna za stranicu Koronavirus.hr” (The Government is hiding who bypassed public procurement procedures and paid half a million kuna for the Koronavirus.hr webpage) , <https://faktograf.hr/2020/05/19/media-val-vlada-koronavirus-stranica/>; Accessed: 20 December 2020.

117 Eva Benedik, “Zašto je svijet morao stati zbog COVIDA-19, ali zbog SARS-a, MERS-a i Ebole nije?” (Why the world

and not in the case of SARS, MERS or Ebola virus. The author of the article finds the explanation in epidemiological reasons because “SARS and MERS did not cause the same level of harm like COVID-19 as they do not spread so easily. SARS and MERS spread through much closer contact, among members of families or healthcare workers and their patients. Most importantly, those infected do not spread the disease while they don’t have the symptoms. After they are taken ill, people usually remain at home or are hospitalized which makes it harder for the virus to spread”. The author goes on to explain that although swine flu spreads easily, it is not as deadly, because in 2009 it killed more than half a million people and it is estimated that more than a billion people were infected by the end of 2010, while Ebola which is much deadlier than Covid-19, can be isolated more easily. According to Lule’s master myth matrix, this article frames the coronavirus within the flood narrative which in newspaper articles as a rule relates to large natural disaster events, dangers related to inexplicable and wild forces of nature faced with which man is often helpless. This narrative of the coronavirus was present in almost all media content during the lockdown period, the purpose of which was to convince the public that suspension of human rights guaranteed under the Constitution is justified, even though this was not the case in similar situations from previous crises. A new narrative was created which strongly took hold in the media reality even after the lockdown period, and according to this frame, human rights to the freedom of movement, socializing and work were less important than the necessary fight against an invisible enemy through which a change in ideology and value systems is created. During the lockdown period, media content often demanded that the public accept the narrative of a victimized hero. The “victim” adds a human element to the tragedy in most news items, and the victim master myth offers examples of bravery and heroics in directly facing death: plans, careers, dreams and lives shatter in an instant due to the virus as a force of nature, the message being that life should be lived alongside the constant presence of death. On 26 March 2020 in an article and segment “These are the heroes fighting the invisible enemy: You find it difficult to stay at home? Look at them and think again”<sup>118</sup> RTL Television celebrates doctors, salesclerks, delivery workers and others who bravely work every day and endanger their own lives so that citizens for whom the epidemic has limited the right to move, socialize and work, would find life in isolation more pleasant. The victim narrative is in the frame. A similar framework is obvious in the messages: *Be responsible, stay at home*, appealing to the public to accept the role of the victimized hero in order to overcome an invisible, powerful enemy. Media discourse perpetuates victory narratives like David vs. Goliath, or the common man against the unrelenting forces of nature, salvation, the fall and sacrifice that leads to victory and a painful transformation promising a new, better world. In opposition to the responsible heroes, the media space was in this period also filled with punishment narratives on irresponsible individuals

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had to stand still for COVID-19, but not for SARS, MERS or Ebola?”), <https://www.telegram.hr/zivot/zasto-je-svijet-morao-stati-zbog-covida-19-ali-zbog-sars-a-mers-a-i-bole-nije/>; Accessed: 20 December 2020.

118 Danka Derifaj, “Dok ste vi doma, oni rade za vas! Direkt donosi priču o herojima u doba koronavirusa” (While you stay in, they work for you! Direkt presents the story on heroes during the corona crisis), <https://www.rtl.hr/vijesti-hr/korona/3671445/dok-ste-vi-doma-oni-rade-za-vas-direkt-donosi-pricu-o-herojima-u-doba-koronavirusa/>; Accessed: 20 December 2020.

who do not listen to epidemiologists due to their stupidity or arrogance. For example, an article on Net.hr published on 21 March 2020 under the title “Incredible arrogance: Man from the Virovitica area in self-isolation invited his friends and had a party, now he is facing a hefty fine”<sup>119</sup> warns of an arrogant individual fined with 8000 HRK. In line with this narrative, the Croatian media also reported on the American basketball player who joked about the virus and was later infected,<sup>120</sup> and an American youth who went to a corona party where he caught the virus and died a horrible death.<sup>121</sup> Punishments vary from financial ones, to public shaming and deaths. At the same time, individuals from the Crisis Headquarters, primarily Davor Božinović, Krunoslav Capak and Alemka Markotić, were transformed almost overnight into media heroes during the analysed period and the media worked hard to build their personality cults. Ranging from panegyrics to Alemka Markotić<sup>122</sup> and Minister Vili Beroš<sup>123</sup> in lifestyle magazines such as Gloria, to media inflating the news on children drawing corona heroes,<sup>124</sup> or their accessibility and everyday qualities,<sup>125</sup> in addition to the constant tension of press conferences held every day, when these archetypal heroes present to the public their successful heroic fight against the powerful enemy. Their characteristics during the lockdown period were bravery, professionalism, wisdom, empathy, strictness, a serious approach, unquestionable authority, and they were often compared to epidemiologists from other countries in order to stress their superiority in finding the most appropriate response to the crisis, which confirms the quest narrative.

Analysing the previously mentioned articles through using the analytical matrix suggested by Gillespie and Toynbee, all key elements for manipulating master narratives in the media framing process are visible here:

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- 119 “Nevjerojatna bahatost: Muškarac s područja Virovitice u samoizolaciji pozvao ekipu i napravio tulum, platit će masnu kaznu”, <https://net.hr/danas/crna-kronika/nevjerojatna-bahatost-muskarac-s-podrucja-virovitice-u-samoizolaciji-pozvao-ekipu-i-napravio-tulum-platit-ce-masnu-kaznu/>; Accessed: 20 December 2020.
- 120 “Prije dva dana sprdao se s koronavirusom, a sada je prvi zaraženi košarkaš u NBA ligi” (Two days ago he joked about the coronavirus, now he is the first infected basketball player in the NBA League), <https://gol.dnevnik.hr/clanak/rubrika/kosarka/rudy-gobert-sprdao-se-s-koronavirusom-prije-dva-dana---597205.html>; Accessed: 20 December 2020.
- 121 “Muškarac otišao na ‘korona party’ kako bi dokazao da je virus prevara. Zarazio se i umro!” (Man goes to a ‘corona party’ to prove the virus is a hoax. He got infected and died!), <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/svijet/muskarac-otisao-na-korona-party-kako-bi-dokazao-da-je-virus-prevara-zarazio-se-i-umro-15007927>; Accessed: 20 December 2020.
- 122 “Heroina nacije: prof. Alemka Markotić otkriva kada će nam biti bolje: ‘vidim svjetlo na kraju tunela’”, (National heroine: Professor Alemka Markotić reveals when things will get better: ‘I can see the light at the end of the tunnel’”) <https://www.gloria.hr/gl/magazin/heroina-nacije-prof-alemka-markotic-otkriva-kada-ce-nam-biti-bolje-vidim-svjetlo-na-kraju-tunela-10184098>; Accessed: 20 December 2020.
- 123 “Ekskluzivno: supruga junaka nacije otkriva čime ju je ministar osvojio i što najviše kod njega voli” (Exclusive: wife of national hero reveals how the Minister swept her off her feet and what she loves most about him”), <https://www.gloria.hr/gl/magazin/ekskluzivno-supruga-junaka-nacije-otkriva-cime-ju-je-ministar-osvojio-i-sto-najvise-kod-njega-voli-10106017>; Accessed: 20 December 2020.
- 124 Martina Petrović, “Djeca crtežima pokazuju da su članovi stožera njihovi junaci - Berošev i Božinovićev odgovor je nevjerojatno dirljiv” (Children draw members of the headquarters as their heroes and the touching response by Beroš and Božinović), <https://miss7.24sata.hr/lifestyle/djeca-crtezima-pokazuju-da-su-clanovi-stozera-njihovi-junaci-berosev-i-bozinovicev-odgovor-je-nevjerojatno-dirljiv-29839>; Accessed: 20 December 2020.
- 125 “Šimun o pozivu ministra: ‘On još stigne i mene nazvati, sad je definitivno heroj’” (Šimun on the Minister’s invitation: He can still call me, he is definitely a hero now), <https://novosti.hr/simun-o-pozivu-ministra-on-jos-stigne-i-mene-nazvati-sad-je-definitivno-heroj/>; Accessed: 20 December 2020.

- Providing information with the aim of gaining public consent for suspending fundamental constitutional rights (limiting freedom,<sup>126</sup> freedom of movement,<sup>127</sup> the right to public assembly,<sup>128</sup> commerce freedoms,<sup>129</sup> etc.) which is visible in media content explaining why the world needed to stand still for COVID-19;
- Positive appraisal of us, the responsible, obedient, those aboard the acceptable train so skilfully managed by the Government of the Republic of Croatia and its lobbyists in the Crisis Headquarters which is visible in media content celebrating heroes in the war against the invisible enemy;
- Negative appraisal of those not aboard the Government train and not obeying the prescribed epidemiological measures who then need to be punished with fines, public shaming, disease, and the worst among them, with death;
- Emphasizing community/shared participation in the pandemic theme visible through continued reiteration of messages “Be responsible, stay at home” appealing to the acceptance of the victimized hero role in order to together overcome the invisible, powerful enemy;
- Emphasizing a certain perspective and/or concept of the pandemic theme is visible in creating a whole new narrative that deeply took hold in the media reality even after the lockdown period, and according to this frame, human rights are not as important as the fight against the virus which paves the way to a change in ideology and value systems.

## IN CONCLUSION

The presented analysis makes clear that in Croatia during the lockdown, media narratives were extremely influenced by elite ideology i.e. ideology of the ruling party, which had the consequence of creating very recognizable, mythical and even banal media frames. Research of media narratives in Croatia during the lockdown period points to an extremely frequent use of master narratives of the flood, overcoming the monster, the quest, tragedy as punishment for egoism and arrogance, rebirth, while members of the Crisis Headquarters were framed within the hero archetype.

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126 The Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, Article 22: “No one shall be deprived of liberty, nor may such liberty be restricted, except when specified by law, upon which a court shall decide”, <https://www.sabor.hr/en/constitution-republic-croatia-consolidated-text>; Accessed: 13 May 2021.

127 The Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, Article 32: “Anyone lawfully within the territory of the Republic of Croatia shall enjoy freedom of movement and freedom to choose his/her residence. All citizens of the Republic shall be entitled to leave the state territory at any time and permanently or temporarily settle abroad, and to return at any time. The right to movement within the territory of the Republic of Croatia and the right to depart may be exceptionally be curtailed by law, if necessary to protect the legal order, or the health, rights and liberties of others”, <https://www.sabor.hr/en/constitution-republic-croatia-consolidated-text>; Accessed: 13 May 2021.

128 The Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, Article 42: “Everyone shall be guaranteed the right to public assembly and peaceful protest, in compliance with law”, <https://www.sabor.hr/en/constitution-republic-croatia-consolidated-text>; Accessed: 13 May 2021.

129 The Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, Article 49: “Free enterprise and free markets shall form the foundation of the economic system of the Republic of Croatia”, <https://www.sabor.hr/en/constitution-republic-croatia-consolidated-text>; Accessed: 13 May 2021.

In terms of frequently used propaganda techniques, name calling was used against all of those who did not unquestioningly give consent to the suspension of fundamental human rights without constitutionally prescribed processes. These individuals were likened to anti-vaxxers and conspiracy theory believers. The glittering generality technique was also used, by which individuals such as Alemka Markotić, Vili Beroš and Krunoslav Capak were linked to universal virtues like responsibility, bravery, wisdom, empathy, firmness, which created the frame for the acceptance and approval of their statements without examining the evidence. The technique of transfer was also frequently used, whereby positive attributes of national symbols were transferred onto individuals, like for example the telling illustration of a “children’s” drawing for an imaginary 30 kuna note bearing the image of Alemka Markotić and a whole range of testimonials by innocent children celebrating the COVID heroes Alemka Markotić and Vili Beroš, with the purpose of ensuring uncritical acceptance of all ideas, measures and views by representatives of the Crisis Headquarters.<sup>130</sup> The technique known as plain folks was also used, which presented to the public the accessibility of COVID heroes and heroines who regardless of their numerous responsibilities found the time to respond to children who drew pictures of them. The Crisis Headquarters and the Government often used the card stacking technique and meticulously selected information that painted suggested measures in good light even when they had no epidemiological foundation such as the ones relating to the Catholic Church and veterans as important elective bodies for the Croatian Democratic Party. The conformity of the people was continuously manipulated when the bandwagon technique was used, which is obvious in the constant pleas for responsibility and community. All of this points to the conclusion that during the spring lockdown, communication was a planned activity by the Government aimed towards rallying the public for its particular political interests, that is, winning the parliamentary election, with the help of mass orchestration of attractively packaged media messages whose actual purpose and lack of real reasons for support were hidden under the cover of the global crisis.

Unfortunately, analysis of foreign media and scientific narratives also points to similar conclusions, that is, the nonexistence of a real critical approach which would be the necessary precondition for achieving citizen media literacy. Despite frequent messages that crisis is an opportunity, and that this global crisis might pave the way to establishing a better and just world, this ambition is not visible in media or scientific frameworks. The main features are old divisions, shifting responsibilities to others and unwillingness and inability to accept one’s responsibility as a species for the climate crisis we are facing and the degraded environment which are related to the current pandemic. It is still easier to label the enemy in bats, the Chinese people, or people who don’t think like us, than to take responsibility and work at solving the real issues, instead of the ones created through political interests.

The worrying aspect is that the comparison of this crisis to previous ones reveals the ambition to establish a new, but not necessarily a better or more just ideological and value system. In this system

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<sup>130</sup> <https://miss7.24sata.hr/lifestyle/djeca-crtezima-pokazuju-da-su-clanovi-stozera-njihovi-junaci-berosev-i-bozinov-icev-odgovor-je-nevjerojatno-dirljiv-29839>; Accessed: 20 December 2020.

it is not problematic to use media manipulation in order to manufacture consent for the suspension of fundamental human rights, by several individuals who have been purposefully framed as heroes in order to provide them with an almost godlike status. The global lockdown phenomenon can in this sense be defined as a very successful experiment of pacifying people through using media framing methods.

## Medijsko uokvirivanje korona virusa u Hrvatskoj

### Sažetak

*Medijsko uokvirivanje je tehnika kojom mediji uokviruju vijesti u prepoznatljive narative koji korespondiraju s nesvjesnim slojevima psihe. Mediji prenaglašavaju određene aspekte događaja dok, s druge strane, po metodi Prokrustove postelje ignoriraju one aspekte koji se ne uklapaju u odabrani narativ (Kunczik i Zipfel, 1998: 103). Medijsko uokvirivanje se oslanja na vještinu pričanja priča, odnosno storytelling, a teoretičari naglašavaju kako master narativi selektirani iz mitova, bajki i snova u velikoj mjeri osnažuju manipulativne učinke medijskog uokvirivanja (Kent, 2015). Rad istražuje na koji su način hrvatski mediji uokvirivali vijesti o korona virusu u razdoblju od uvođenja mjera društvenog distanciranja (19.03.2020.) do popuštanja mjera (27.04.2020.). Preliminarno istraživanje upućuje na korištenje sljedećih master narativa: pobjeda nad čudovištem, od siromaha do bogataša, potraga, tragedija kao kazna za egoizam i oholost, prepород, a istaknuti članovi Nacionalnog stožera uokvireni su u arhetip heroja. Korištenje ovih master narativa u medijskom uokvirivanju korona krize u tzv. prvom valu epidemije, ukazuje na jasnu propagandističku, odnosno manipulativnu namjeru.*

**Ključne riječi:** *medijsko uokvirivanje, pričanje priča, master narativ, korona kriza, propaganda.*



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