Past, future and change: Contemporary analysis of evolving media scapes

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National Identity, Press Photography and the Temporal Depth of News

Ilija Tomanić Trivundža

1. Introduction

This chapter looks at how national identity influences the visual depiction of news; more precisely, it will demarcate the ways in which press photographs can be utilised to frame news reporting according to the structural framework of national identity. It is based on the premise that – in spite of the globalisation of culture, politics and information flows, accompanied by the fragmentation of news consumption, individualisation of society and increasing political apathy or discontent with the dominant socio-political order – news production and consumption are still primarily couched in the context of the nation-state and collective identification with the "imagined community" of a nation. Moreover, photographs – with their interpretative ambivalence, their suggestive power of affective meanings and their ability to communicate symbolic or implied relations between subjects and express "things" that cannot be fully expressed in words – are seen as particularly valuable "framing devices" for the communication of abstract principles and ideas of national belonging.

2. National identity

National identity (or national identification)[1] is not a given, inborn, unitary and static form of social identity, but emerges in the form of a narrative of the self through conscious and unconscious processes of meaning-making over time and in relation to a particular social context and its limitations. Although identities may be experienced as unitary or "whole" by individuals or parts of societies, they are temporary fixations of intersecting discourses that produce multiple, even contradictory identities,

1 On the differences between the terms "national identity" and "national identification", see Brubaker and Cooper, 2000; Hall1996/2000; Bhabha 1990/2000.

which individuals internalise and re-negotiate over the passage of time. The construction of identities is, therefore, a process of active construction, of "imagining" self and others, which develops through the processes of socialisation, and which is constructed and maintained in the "embodied habits of social life" (Jenkins, 1996; Billig 1995/2001). Social identifications such as collective identities of groups or nations are basically ongoing processes of the symbolic construction of relations of similarity and difference that provide the scheme or patterns for a more general model of meaning-making, of constituting the world as meaningful. They are constructed in social processes (educational, cultural and political) primarily through the means of language, emotions and symbols, promoted and reified through the communication networks of social groups and institutions of state and civil society. Individual identities can in fact be seen as amalgams of an array of collective or social identifications, as their personalised and evolving narrativisations. These are (at least for the most part) subconscious cognitive and emotive processes that, to a large extent, depend on culturally and institutionally supplied and reified frameworks of meaning in the process of producing identity as a fantasy of the "whole" self.

Thus national identity can be conceptualised as one of the forms of social identity – as a particular "socio-historical allotrope of ethnic identification" (Jenkins, 1996), whose function is the social organisation of cultural difference through culture and interaction. National identity consists of internalised, shared patterns of social differentiation (Barth, 1969/1998) that promote and elicit feelings of belonging to an "imagined community" (Andersen, 1983/1991).

National identity essentially provides people with a sense of place in the world; it situates individuals geographically or physically, as well as linguistically, socially, legally, economically, politically and emotionally, within a distinctive homeland, a nation-state. At the same time, it also contextualises the homeland nation-state within a world system of nation-states. National identity is, however, not something that exists „objectively", outside the individual, something that people could "have", "possess" or "belong to". It is, as Anderson (1983/1991) points out, a product of shared collective narrativisation, an act of "imagining" a community that cannot be performed by individuals alone, but only through the mediation of some form of mass communication that produces awareness of commonality and shared (mass) culture. Moreover, as Billig notes, national identity is not simply an inner psychological state of mind but a "form of life, which is daily lived in the world of nation-states" (1995/2001: 68) and

can be found in the "embodied habits of social life" (Ibid.: 8). Although national identity emerges as an interaction and transaction between the individual and the collective (social), it is first and foremost an explicit and institutionalised project of the (nation) state, and its institutionalisation is necessary to achieving a sufficient level of social homogeneity. Moreover, a nation is "imagined" as a social group with a "temporal dimension", as a "community of destiny" (Bauer, 1907/1996) which includes both notions of a communal shared past as well as an anticipated future. National identification produces the notion of nation as an enduring, unitary being and binds individuals with past and future generations, providing them with a feeling of solidarity and a sense of place in the world (as space) and time (as history). As Renan put it, nation is constituted through a sentiment of solidarity which *"implies past, but is summed up in the present [...] by a clearly expressed desire to live a common life"* (1882/2001: 19).[2]

3. National identity as a discursive construction

Due to the centrality of (mass) communication to the processes of collective identity formation, national identity is best understood as a discursive process of articulation and (re)negotiation of centrality of a certain array of symbols and ideas – which I will term "privileged discursive elements". Privileged discursive elements are the articulation points of national identity provided by an array of nation-state institutions that form the basis of and delineate a framework within which national belonging is enacted by individuals. They range from canonised interpretations of history and culture (that enter public knowledge through education, publishing, museums, popular culture, selection of state holidays etc.) to myths and symbols that saturate the discourse of political parties or state representatives. Institutions produce the structural limits within which national identity can be articulated and negotiated: they offer primary articulation points for the processes of national identification, and thus outline the symbolic sphere which is essential to maintaining a certain level of community stability. As such they mark the social level of identity formation processes, which is complemented by the individual level – that of "performed symbols". Performed symbols are personal, informal, unplanned, symbolic articulations of national identity.[3] Although, in practice, the two levels are

2 But Renan did not fail to point out that such a feeling of shared history rests not so much on collective recollection of the past as on selective amnesia (cf. Hobsbawm, 1992). Extending Renan's argument, Gellner (1994: 192) claims that nations are constructed either through induced oblivion or created memory.

3 To give an example, the founding myth of Slovene statehood is the myth of Karantania as the first Slovene state, which is a privileged discursive element, institutionalised

closely related and intertwined, they should be theorised as separate since the relationship between the two is by no means equal. 'Privileged discursive elements' belong to a higher order, they form the basis for and delineate a framework within which 'performed symbols' can be reproduced, enacted and performed as meaningful acts of national identity signification in the everyday lives of citizens.[4]

For the purpose of this chapter, I will limit my investigation of Slovene national identity to what I have termed 'privileged discursive elements', to institutionally supplied identification cues. The construction of Slovene national identity has been a very turbulent venture, passing through four major reinventions in little more than a century, and can be seen as a typical example of a hegemonic struggle over the discursive definition and interpretation of social reality. From the first national programmes of the 19th century to the national independence movement in the second half of the 1980s, Slovene national identity can be seen as an ongoing struggle for the (re)definition and (re)interpretation of a fairly stable pool of privileged discursive elements. They include: (1) Slovene language and literary culture as foundations of the nation; (2) the myth of Karantanija as the origin of the Slovene state; (3) the myth of the nation's thousand-year dream of independence; (4) the imagined geo-cultural space of (Central) Europe; (5) the notion of 'limes' and frontier; (6) the bond between religion, Sloveneness and ruralness; (7) the bond between rural land(scape) and nation.[5] These seven privileged discursive elements address different aspects of Slovene national identity: the existence of a separate language justifies the claim to nationhood, just as the two myths ground and justify Slovenia's claim to statehood. The imagined geocultural space and the notion of 'limes' work to establish a wider cultural (civilisational) frame of belonging, while the particular emphasis on religion (Catholicism) and ruralness seeks to secure a particular characterisation of the nation (positive auto-stereotype of Slovenes as a kind, hard-working, peace-loving and non-violent nation). These seven privileged discursive elements can

through the educational system, history and state symbols such as money. On the other hand, the heraldic print of the Black Panther in logos used by small businesses (or on the T-shirts of right-wing nationalist groups) is a performed symbol, an expression of an individual's negotiation of national identity.

4 Regardless of how multiple and changing our identities are, they are *"derived from a multiplicity but ultimately limited repertoire of available social, public, and cultural narratives"* (Sommers and Gibson, 1994: 39). Although full normative consensus is not a prerequisite of national identity, the institutional "agenda" is never neutral but at least implicitly normatively evaluated – it prescribes not only "how things are done" but also how "they should be done".

5 This chapter is based on my doctoral thesis *Photography and the Construction of Collective Identities: Representation of the "Other" in Slovene Photojournalism* (Tomanić Trivundža 2010) .

be understood as a pool of socially shared, commonly available (meta) frames that can significantly structure news reporting of domestic and international events.

Communication research has for a long time paid attention to the influence of "contextual factors" on the selection and nature of news reporting, particularly on their power to override professional ideologies or specific organisational practices and economic constraints. The influence of "national filters" was, for example, a part of the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) in the late 1970s and early 1980s (e.g. Chang and Lee, 1992; Fenby, 1986; Okigbo, 1985; Rosengren, 1974; Sreberny and Stevenson, 1999; Stevenson and Cole, 1984; Wu, 2003) and has – in framing research – recently re-emerged under the concept of "national interest" (e.g. Nossek, 2004; Yang, 2003; cf. Lee and Yang, 1995; Entman, 2004). This, however, is an often loosely defined and ambiguous concept, so this chapter builds on a more tangibly defined concept of privileged discursive elements of national identity which – like frames – offer *"preferred rationalities and schemes of cognition within the collective culture of society"* (Akhavan-Majid and Ramaprasad, 2000: 49).

4. Privileged discursive elements of (Slovene) national identity in the visual coverage of news

It should be noted that, both within framing research and studies of the influence of "national filters" on news reporting, visual coverage of news has been largely neglected. The overview presented below of the possible strategies for the visual framing of news through privileged discursive elements of national identity is based on an analysis of visual news reporting on two events that significantly contested the dominant discursive formation of Slovene national identity in relation to both external and internal Others – the 2003 referendum on joining the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, and the 2006 eviction of a Roma family, the Strojans. The qualitative framing analysis of two Slovene daily newspapers (Delo and Dnevnik) and two political weekly magazines (Mladina and Mag) traced the presence or absence of privileged discursive elements of Slovene national identity in visual (and textual) news over a period of three months leading up to the EU/NATO referendum in March 2003, focusing on the coverage of the pre-referendum debates, and nearly three months' worth of coverage of the "Strojan affair", from its beginnings in October 2006 to its partial resolution in January 2007.

4.1 NATIONAL IDENTITY AND PRESS PHOTOGRAPHY: DIRECT VISUAL FRAMING

The results of the study point to certain limitations for the direct "national" visual framing of news accounts. On the one hand, photographic framing is limited by the capacity to visualise – certain privileged discursive elements of (Slovene) national identity are essentially "non-photographable" or at least hard to visualise, (such as emphasis on the language and literary culture, which can only be referenced indirectly e.g. through portraits of writers and poets). On the other hand, the capacity to situate the reported events in the easily recognisable narrative of national belonging appears to be constrained by the type of news – it is far more frequent with non-news genres, such as commentary or analysis, where the selection of photographs is not constrained to visual coverage of the (exact) event and its particular mise-en-scène. Photographs in the two political magazines and in the Saturday supplements of the two dailies, where images are used more independently as illustrations or visual statements, rather than providers of news and information, frequently referenced the symbolic imaginary of Slovene national identity through depictions of rural landscape (particularly that of alpine Slovenia), references to Catholicism (churches), and elements of cultural heritage (hayrack, folk costumes, Lipica horses). These images of the Alpine landscape, churches on hilltops and rural vistas with hayracks belong to a standardised pool of imagery for the visualisation of Slovenia and Sloveneness in various non-journalistic discourses, most notably in tourism (cf. Kučan, 1998), but also in advertising and political propaganda.

In the case of daily news on the EU/NATO pre-referendum debates and events, direct visual framing was almost non-existent, as most events – visits by international politicians, press conferences, parliament meetings and public debates and demonstrations – offered little material with which to selectively frame the images. The potential for visual news framing was more explicit in the visual coverage of the Strojan affair, where, in a number of articles, photographs were used to highlight easily recognisable elements of cultural heritage, such as the portrayal of protestors next to a hayrack (typical of the Slovene rural landscape), focusing on trucks of local volunteer fire brigades blocking the roads to prevent the relocation of the Roma family, or on the flying of (Slovene and EU) flags on barricades. In all of the cases described, the identity of anti-Roma protesters was clearly framed within a standard symbolic imaginary of Sloveneness and captions would often serve to further anchor the sense of national belonging.

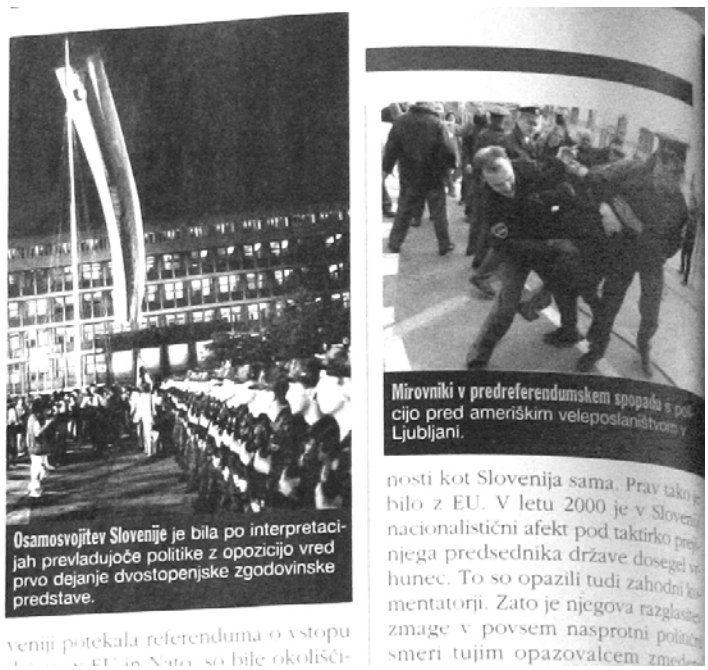
Table 1: Direct and indirect mechanism of visual framing according to the privileged discursive elements of national identity

DIRECT VISUAL FRAMING	INDIRECT VISUAL FRAMING
1. Visualising symbols of national identity (in news and press photographs)	1. Underrepresentation of culturally different (Other) nations, states, and representatives
2. Use of archive images for coverage of current affairs	2. Coverage of different types of events (negative as opposed to routine news)
3. Photo-collages, photo-montages and photo-illustrations	3. Different mode of depiction of same topics/actors
4. Interpretative captioning	4. Visual (stereo)typisation and use of unrelated images for coverage of current affairs

This analysis, however, also revealed three alternative strategies for the visualisation of privileged discursive elements of national identity: (1) the use of archive photographs relating to the nation's canonical historical events; (2) photo-illustration and photo-montage; and (3) the use of interpretative captions. The most prominent use of press photographs to provide a national frame of reference and to provide temporal depth to current events was the use of archive photographs. A number of iconic images connected with the pro-democracy movement of the late 1980s, the first democratically elected government and the 10-day war for independence were used in the two magazines as potent interpretative devices. Bearing no new information value, their function was to place reported events within the historical narrative of the nation (through the use of single or multiple archive images) or to provide a moral evaluation of the actions undertaken by individuals or groups according to the highest moral imperative – the nation's independence. In a nationalist paraphrasing of the moral imperative, all deeds that do not/did not conform to the nation's teleological goal of forming an independent, sovereign nation-state were deemed morally corrupt and potentially dangerous to the community. This would typically be achieved through juxtaposition of two images, e.g. juxtaposing the iconic image of the flag being raised on the evening Slovenia declared independence with an image of anti-NATO demonstrators, which serves to characterise the latter as ultimately unpatriotic. Alternatively, publications would resort to the use of photo-illustration, photo-collages and editorial illustrations to bestow a national frame of reference, such as the nation's thousand-year dream of independence, democratic affinities and the inherently pro-western character of Slovenes. A good example of this came in the form of photo-collages in Mag that linked NATO

with democracy and NATO opponents with "undemocratic forces", either in the guise of former Yugoslavia, communism or despotism. The third strategy involved the use of interpretative captioning that served to "nationalise" and "historicise" images that bore no explicit visual connection to the markers of national identity. Text, either in the form of image captions or headlines, served to anchor the "proper" reading of the image and the depicted persons and/or events in reference to the nation or its history, especially to the nation's struggle for independence.

Figure 1: Direct visual framing: Use of archive images to interpret current events (Visual framing of anti-NATO protesters as unpatriotic by juxtaposing current photograph (right) with an iconic archive image (left) of flag raising during Slovenia's declaration of independence).



4.2 NATIONAL IDENTITY AND PRESS PHOTOGRAPHY: INDIRECT VISUAL FRAMING

However, the analysis also revealed that images can be used effectively as potent indirect articulators of national identity and delineators of national boundary. International news, for example, can contribute to the project

of the Barthian articulation of a nation's boundary by outlining what Said (1979/1994) has termed "imagined geographies" – discursively constructed perceptions of space which function both as building blocks of identity and as means of and justifications for symbolic, economic or political control and the subordination of certain territories and areas. The analysis has shown that there are at least four aspects in which press photographs can be understood to be functioning as boundary articulation mechanisms of imagined geographies. These are: (1) the underrepresentation of culturally different (Other) nations, states and their representatives; (2) coverage of different types of events (negative as opposed to routine news); (3) a different mode of depiction of the same topics/actors (e.g. representations of politicians); (4) coverage according to preconceived, "typical" images of certain regions or people.

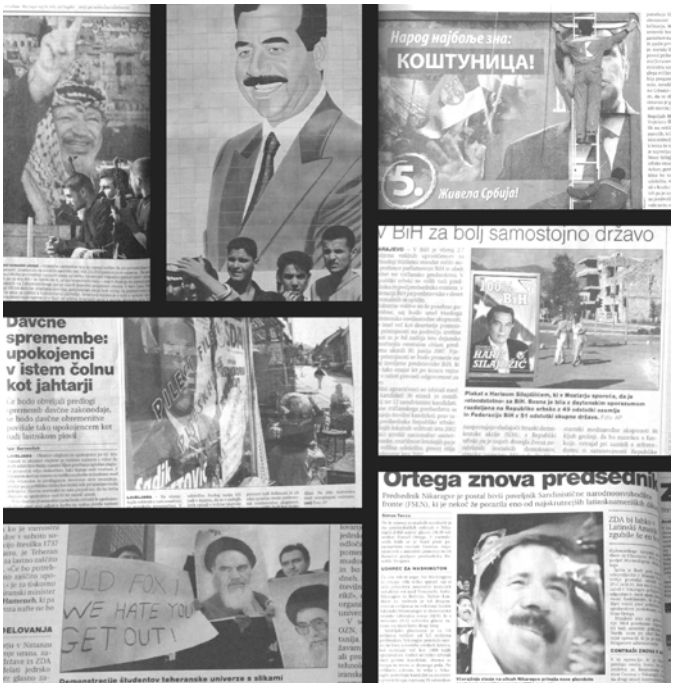
The first two strategies are equally valid for both textual and visual sides of news production, have been well documented within studies of journalism and international communication (e.g. NWICO debate, see MacBride et al., 1980/1984), and, due to a lack of space, will need to be left out of this discussion. But the differentiated portrayal of topics and political actors and the use of unrelated and symbolic imagery need further clarification. What the analysis revealed is that Slovene media routinely use different modes of depiction for the same types of social actors ors the same type of events. The former was most evident in the images of politicians, where politicians from the other side of the imagined boundary were routinely depicted as passive, less approachable or less individualised than their Western counterparts.[6] Moreover, they are often not even depicted in person at all, but through election posters, statues, images on TV screens etc. or through images of anonymous citizens and street scenes (cf. Tomanić Trivundža, 2006). The fourth way in which news and press photographs serve as indirect markers of national identity is the patterned use of unrelated, symbolic and (stereo) typical images. Thus, in Slovene media, news from the developing world is frequently visualised through archive photographs, photographs from other regions and countries, unrelated photographs and depictions that resonate with image repertoires that come from the non-news register – those of stock and travel photography. Photographs of smoke-filled Middle Eastern coffeehouses frequently accompanied news and political analysis reports from the region at the time of the EU/NATO pre-referendum debates, and articles on Fidel Castro's illness and recovery at the same time as the Stro-

6 The differentiated pattern of visual depiction was discernible on the level of basic content analysis as well as on the level of qualitative image analysis – e.g. photographs of "non-Western" politicians were more frequently framed to include other social actors, such as fellow politicians, citizens or military personnel.

jan affair were illustrated with photographs closely resonating with tourist images, motifs and clichés. Images drawing directly on established social clichés and religious or ethnic stereotypes which provided no information specifically linked to the events being reported, such as hooded Muslim militants and veiled female combatants, were also used by the press and were, as a rule, very prominently displayed. Such images work by evoking an associative chain of preconceived notions, interpretations and attitudes.

It should be noted that these photographs, with little or no news value, or photographs that are not directly related to the events being depicted (everyday scenes from developing countries), are not merely illustrations, attention-grabbers and visual attributers of focus and importance. By obscuring the specific aspects of individual events, they serve as potent purveyors of pre-established ideas, stereotypes, visualising differentiation and social distance that establishes a hierarchy of regions or nations within the nationalised imagined geographies, legitimising the assessor's superior position towards less developed countries or countries that are at least perceived as such.

Figure 2: Indirect visual framing: Different mode of depiction of the same type of political actors (Non-Western politicians not depicted in person but as representations of themselves.).



5. Conclusion

The analysis has confirmed that press and news photographs can serve as potent framing mechanisms, nesting the reported events or commentary within a shared interpretational schemata. In so doing, photographs lend a temporal dimension to textual news that might not be explicated by the text itself, and, in the process, frequently depart from professional norms for the accurate and timely reporting of events. At least in the case of Slovene media, the temporal depth that press photographs lend to ongoing events not only evokes the notion of a "community of destiny", but is also structured by the identification patterns of that community. What was evident in the visual coverage of the two events was that direct visual framing through the use of easily recognisable national symbols, iconic historical images, interpretative captions or photo-montages and photo-illustrations served to "historicise" the current events, to give them temporal depth in an ongoing narrativisation of nation. On the other hand, indirect strategies of visual framing discernible in the visual coverage of international news seem to have the opposite function – to abstract the temporal dimension. Several authors (e.g. Pickering, 2001) claim that recurring patterns of typification and stereotypification are essentially a denial of history, which would, by extension, mean that symbolic or non-related photographs would serve to situate a specific event in a historically unspecific flow of events. In some cases, the denial of history is in fact not singular but double. What such visualisations of news essentially do is to abstract an event from its current, ongoing history, only to contextualise it in a non-politicised version of history, in which the crisis in Sudan, for example, becomes framed as an issue of hunger and humanitarianism, rather than the direct and indirect consequence of colonialist and neo-colonialist economic and military policies. The national frame of reference is of paramount importance for this project, as it defines the regions which are applicable to various types and degrees of dehistoricisation. Visuals are an inherent part of these endeavours and, as shown above, operate not only through the depicted content but also through the type of seeing they invite (Berger, 1972). News photographs are particularly persuasive producers of specific visions of social difference (such as hierarchies of class, ethnicity, race or sexuality), since they appear to be transparent and can – on the level of message – only function affirmatively.[7]

7 See e.g. Worth, 1975/1996.

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