



Josef Seethaler and Gabriele Melischek

Constructing Identities: The Media and International Relations

Since the end of the Cold War, both the political world and the communications environment have changed dramatically. In the field of international relations, former certainties seem to have been replaced by new uncertainties; new confrontations have been leading to new alliances, while calling existing ones into question. In this atmosphere of fading clarity about who can be regarded as a rival or even as an enemy, and whom one can count on as an ally, the media is assumed to play a more powerful role in foreign policy. While academic research has generally warned against overestimating the influence of the media on the conduct of foreign policy, as the so-called “CNN-effect” suggests, the political decision-making process is widely assumed to be indirectly affected by public opinion, which itself is assumed to depend more heavily on media coverage. From this point of view, the role of public opinion in international relations can be best characterized by “constraining” rather than “controlling” policymakers, thus calling attention to the ways collective images and identities are formed and related to other collectivities.

Based on this assumption, we propose an approach for analyzing the role of the media in international relations, which is inspired by the concept of framing. However, unlike in times of the Cold War, this approach has to be able to meet the requirements for analyzing shifting, divisible, and flexible elements in defining collective identities. Therefore, the theoretical framework draws, on the one hand, on constructivist international relations theory which insists that foreign policy is, at its most basic, a process of defining in-groups and out-groups in the modern state system. On the other hand, it also draws on attribution theory which is concerned with how people make explanations for their own and other people’s behavior and the sorts of bias that occur in this process. Considering the importance of the transatlantic alliance, the outlined approach is exemplified by a comparative analysis of European press coverage of the 2004 U.S. presidential election.

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Dr Josef Seethaler is a Senior Scientist at the Commission for Comparative Media and Communication Studies at the Austrian Academy of Sciences and a Lecturer at the University of Vienna. His research interests are in the area of political communication and media systems. He has written a numerous articles on media and politics and on media history. He is co-editor of several books, e.g. *Wahlen und Politikvermittlung durch Massenmedien* [Elections and Mass-Mediated Politics] (2000; with Hans Bohrmann, Otfried Jarren and Josef Seethaler), *Jewish Images in the Media* (2007; with Martin Liepach and Josef Seethaler), *Medien & Kommunikationsforschung im Vergleich* [Media & Communication Research in Comparative Perspective] (2008, with Josef Seethaler and Juergen Wilke), and a book series about Viennese newspapers in the twentieth century (1993-2003, with Gabriele Melischek).

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Dr Gabriele Melischek, M.A., is a Senior Scientist at the Commission for Comparative Media and Communication Studies at the Austrian Academy of Sciences. Her research focuses on political communication with special emphasis on media and elections. She is a scientific consultant for the Austrian Foreign Ministry and for various research organizations. She has published a great number of articles on political communication and the media, and she is co-editor of several books, e.g. *Cultural Indicators: An International Symposium* (1984, with Karl Erik Rosengren and James Stappers), *Wahlen und Politikvermittlung durch Massenmedien* [Elections and Mass-Mediated Politics] (2000; with Hans Bohrmann, Otfried Jarren and Josef Seethaler), *Jewish Images in the Media* (2007; with Martin Liepach and Josef Seethaler) and *Medien & Kommunikationsforschung im Vergleich* [Media & Communication Research in Comparative Perspective] (2008, with Josef Seethaler and Juergen Wilke).