Multimodal Analysis of News Magazines' Front-Page Portrayals of the US, Germany, China, and Russia

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Abstract : On the global stage, national image is shaped by historical memory of wars and alliances, government ideology and particularly media stereotypes which represent countries in positive or negative ways. News magazine covers are a key site for national representation. The object of analysis in this paper is the portrayals of the US, Germany, China, and Russia in the front pages and cover stories of "Time", "Der Spiegel", "Beijing Review", and "Expert". Political comedy helps people learn about current affairs even if politics is not their area of interest, and thus satire indirectly sets the public agenda. Coupled with satirical messages, cover images and the linguistic messages embedded in the covers become persuasive visual and verbal factors, known to drive about 80% of magazine sales. Preliminary analysis identified satirical elements in magazine covers, which are known to influence and frame understandings and attract younger audiences. Multimodal and transnational comparative framing analyses lay the groundwork to investigate why journalists, editors and designers deploy certain frames rather than others. This research investigates to what degree frames used in covers correlate with frames within the cover stories and what these framings can tell us about media professionals' representations of their own and other nations. The study sample includes 32 covers consisting of two covers representing each of the four chosen countries from the four magazines. The sampling framework considers two time periods to compare countries' representation with two different presidents, and between men and women when present. The countries selected for analysis represent each category of the international news flows model: the core nations are the US and Germany; China is a semi-peripheral country; and Russia is peripheral. Examining textual and visual design elements on the covers and images in the cover stories reveals not only what editors believe visually attracts the reader's attention to the magazine but also how the magazines frame and construct national images and national leaders. The cover is the most powerful editorial and design page in a magazine because images incorporate less intrusive framing tools. Thus, covers require less cognitive effort of audiences who may therefore be more likely to accept the visual frame without question. Analysis of design and linguistic elements in magazine covers helps to understand how media outlets shape their audience's perceptions and how magazines frame global issues. While previous multimodal research of covers has focused mostly on lifestyle magazines or newspapers, this paper examines the power of current affairs magazines' covers to shape audience perception of national image.

Keywords : framing analysis, magazine covers, multimodality, national image, satire

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