

**COGNITIVE POTENTIAL OF FRAMING  
AND ATTRIBUTE AGENDA-SETTING THEORIES  
(exemplified by “Novaya Gazeta”  
and “The New York Times” coverage  
of the conflict in southeast Ukraine)**

**ПОЗНАВАТЕЛЬНЫЕ ВОЗМОЖНОСТИ ТЕОРИЙ  
ФРЕЙМИНГА И УСТАНОВЛЕНИЯ АТРИБУТИВ-  
НОЙ ПОВЕСТКИ ДНЯ  
(на примере освещения конфликта  
на юго-востоке Украины “Новой Газетой”  
и “Нью-Йорк Таймс”)**

*Alexander A. Kazakov, PhD in Political Science,  
Associate Professor, Chair of the Political Science,  
Faculty of Law, N. G. Chernyshevsky Saratov State University  
Saratov, Russia  
aldr.kazakov@gmail.com*

*Александр Александрович Казаков, кандидат политических наук,  
доцент, кафедра политических наук, юридический факультет,  
Саратовский государственный университет  
имени Н. Г. Чернышевского,  
Саратов, Россия  
aldr.kazakov@gmail.com*

*Boris N. Shestov,  
Chair of the Political Science, Faculty of Law,  
N. G. Chernyshevsky Saratov State University,  
Saratov, Russia  
bord64@gmail.com*

*Борис Николаевич Шестов,  
кафедра политических наук, юридический факультет,  
Саратовский государственный университет  
имени Н. Г. Чернышевского,  
Саратов, Россия  
bord64@gmail.com*

*Peculiarities of “Novaya Gazeta” and “The New York Times” coverage of the conflict in southeast Ukraine are considered in this article. Framing theory as well as attribute agenda-setting theory has become the methodological basis for the research; 98 articles from these newspapers published between March 16 and April 15 form its empirical basis. The temporal distribution of the articles devoted to the events in Russia’s neighboring country is analyzed; the thematic focuses of the publications are compared; frames and sources of citations in the two newspapers are juxtaposed. Having divided all the stories into several content blocks, the authors pay special attention to the most popular of them. The conclusion is made that newspapers’ ways of covering the events in the neighboring country are rather similar. Moreover, sometimes – especially when journalists assessed Russia’s role in the crisis – “Novaya Gazeta” was even more critical of the Kremlin than “The New York Times”.*

**Key words:** *framing, attribute agenda, “Novaya Gazeta”, “The New York Times”, Ukraine.*

*В статье рассматриваются особенности освещения конфликта на юго-востоке Украины российской «Новой газетой» и американской «Нью-Йорк Таймс». Методологической основой исследования стали теории фрейминга и установления атрибутивной повестки дня; эмпирическую базу составили 98 статей указанных изданий, опубликованных в период с 16 марта по 15 апреля 2015 г. Анализируется распределение текстов, посвященных событиям в соседней стране, во времени; сравнивается тематическая направленность публикаций; сопоставляются транслируемые изданиями фреймы и источники цитат. Разделив материалы газет на несколько содержательных блоков, особое внима-*

*ние авторы уделяют анализу наиболее популярных в “Новой газете” и в “Нью-Йорк Таймс” блоков о связанных с рассматриваемым кризисом событиях внутри России и самой Украины. Сделан вывод о схожести подходов газет к освещению ситуации в соседней стране. Более того, в отдельных случаях, особенно когда речь заходила об оценках действий России, журналисты “Новой газеты” порой были настроены по отношению к Кремлю даже более критически, чем их заокеанские коллеги.*

**Ключевые слова:** *фрейминг, атрибутивная повестка дня, “Новая газета”, “Нью-Йорк Таймс”, Украина.*

Taking into consideration the role mass media play nowadays, their impact on the political consciousness of society and individuals is attracting increasing scholarly attention. In modern political science, a variety of aspects related to different media activities are actively explored, including characteristics of the presence of certain events and processes in the information realm. Electoral campaigns, political leaders and opposition, ideologies of different parties, international relations, ethno-religious conflicts, etc. – all of this is frequently analyzed through the prism of the representation of these subjects in the media, i.e. the attention devoted to them, the themes and tone of the stories, manipulative components of media texts, and much more.

This research focuses on the peculiarities of media coverage of one of the most noticeable and resonant current events – the conflict in southeast Ukraine in two newspapers: the Russian “Novaya Gazeta” and the American “The New York Times”. The methodological basis for our study consists of framing theory and second-level agenda setting. Based on the empirical data garnered,

we intend to prove that the concurrent / parallel use of the two theories provides an opportunity to get a holistic view of the subject – in our case, on the specifics of the representation of the events in Russia’s neighboring country in Russian and US periodicals<sup>1</sup>.

By way of preface, a few words about the essence of the considered methodological constructions. Historically speaking, the agenda-setting theory appeared in the late 1960s to early 1970s. Its authors, US scholars Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, empirically proved the link between what is regularly reported by the media and what people, as the consumers of such information, consider important and worthy of their attention (McCombs & Shaw, 1972: 176–187).

In the 1990s, scholars began to consider that media are able to set agendas not only in relation to a variety of processes happening at a given point (ranking them in order of importance), but also with regard to a specific event or person. According to McCombs, Shaw, and their supporters, while informing an audience of certain facts or political figures, media cannot provide the public with all of the information available (because of the limitations in the amount of space in newspapers, or in TV and radio time). Instead, they tend to focus the audience’s attention only on the specific aspects or attributes of the material that are most important, in the author’s opinion (Weaver, McCombs & Shaw, 2004: 259). As a result, a kind of agenda, but in relation to the characteristics of a single theme, is built.

Today, such an agenda is called a second-level agenda or attribute agenda. It is believed that by drawing the audience’s attention to the very specific aspects of the event or features of a political subject, the press largely determines how readers, viewers, or listeners treat it.

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<sup>1</sup> “Novaya Gazeta” is published on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, but the issue on Wednesday, March 25 was not released for some reason.

In other words, by setting the first-level agenda, media affect what people consider important, and by forming an attribute agenda, they program how the audience assesses a particular phenomenon (or, at least, provides a set of facts, which people are guided by in defining their attitude) (Takeshita, 1997: 23).

Another theory in many ways similar to attribute agenda is framing. It is widely believed now that framing is the process of selecting certain aspects of reality displayed by journalists, making them more salient in order to formulate certain causal connections, moral interpretations and recommendations on how to act in relation to a particular situation (Entman, 1993: 52; Scheufele, 2004: 405).

Arguably, the key concept of framing is a frame. One of the best-known definitions of frame was given by W. Gamson and A. Modigliani in 1989. In their opinion, frame is a core idea of media text that reveals the essence and content of a message's main plot (Gamson, Modigliani, 1989: 3). Furthermore, usually this central plotline also contains the articulation of a problem, certain moral judgments, and preferred methods to resolve it (Entman, Matthes, Pellicano, 2009: 177). Therefore, figuratively speaking, we can say that frame is a part of reality in the form in which journalists present it to the audience. This means that any frame initially carries not only the imprint of a subjective perception of reality, but an element of manipulative potential as well.

It should be noted that in Western communicative science, this theory is now almost at the peak of its popularity (Weaver, 2007: 143–144). In Russia, a strong interest to the framing approach is only beginning to be formed (Vakhshayn, 2011a: 114–136; Vakhshayn, 2011b; Vakhshayn, 2008: 65–95; Kazakov, 2015b: 85–90) and framing itself is often studied by Russian scholars in the context of sociolinguistics, psychology, sociology of everyday life (following Goffman's tradition), and some other social sciences. At the same time, possibilities of application of this approach to the problems of political communication

are not developed enough. Flowing from the above, this article may be considered as an attempt to establish this connection.

The empirical basis of our analysis was formed by the articles dedicated to the crisis in southeast Ukraine published in “Novaya Gazeta” and “The New York Times” from March 16 through April 15, 2015. Of course, one month is not enough to make far-reaching conclusions, but at the same time we believe that it was a snapshot sufficient for revealing some key features of newspapers’ attitude toward the theme.

When choosing newspapers, we bore in mind the fact that “Novaya Gazeta” has traditionally been one of the periodicals most oppositional to the current Russian government. “The New York Times” is also known for its highly critical position towards the Kremlin. Despite the differences in their impacts and circulations, it seemed quite interesting for us to compare the generated attribute agendas and frames (concerning the events in Ukraine) of the two papers oppositional to Moscow and to juxtapose their frames of reference and systems of values. The hypothesis we stated was that the images of what was happening in southeast Ukraine offered by “Novaya Gazeta” and “The New York Times” were essentially the same.

Selection of articles for the analysis was carried out by continuous and daily reading of online versions of newspaper issues. During that period, 13 issues of “Novaya Gazeta”<sup>2</sup> and 31 issues of “The New York Times” were published. In total, the Russian medium devoted 59 articles to the events in Ukraine while “The New York Times” devoted only 14. Another 25 pieces from the US newspaper focused on Russia but contained no references to the events in Donbass. They were also included separately in the set

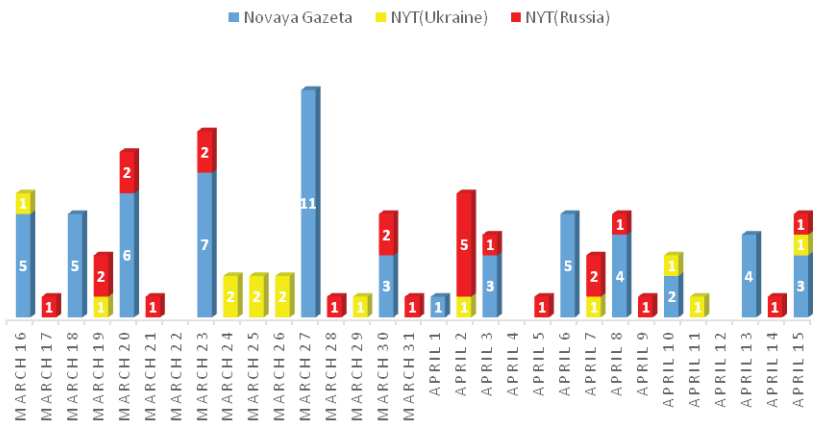
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<sup>2</sup> It should be pointed out that “The New York Times” is published every day, while “Novaya Gazeta”, as already noted, – on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.

of analyzed texts. The average size of an article about Ukraine was 6770 characters (including spaces) in “Novaya Gazeta” and 4953 – in “The New York Times”. Materials devoted to that topic were written by 34 journalists in the Russian newspaper and by eight in the US newspaper. Additionally, twelve authors from “Novaya Gazeta” wrote more than one publication and only three journalists of “The New York Times” did so. Comparison of these quantitative indicators (the number and the size of publications, corps of the authors), in our opinion, suggests that the Russian newspaper in general pays more attention to the problems that are of greater interest to its country than to the US. We think this is natural and logical; it would probably be strange to see an opposite situation. At the same time, the amount of the stories run by “The New York Times” seems quite impressive as, unlike many other American newspapers, it published almost one Ukraine-related story every second day.

*Figure 1*

**The temporal distribution of “Novaya Gazeta” and “The New York Times” articles (pcs.)**



The blue color indicates the number of articles on the events in southeast Ukraine, published in “Novaya Gazeta”, yellow – in “The New York Times”, red – the number of publications of the US newspaper about Russia, with no focus on events in Donbass.

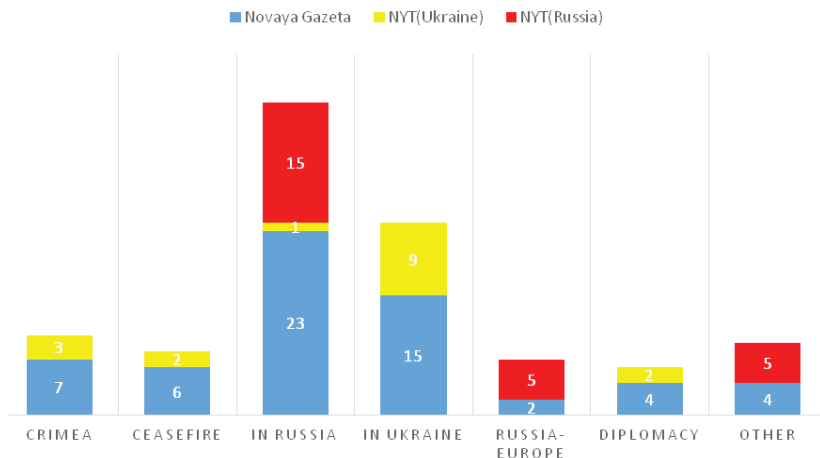
Speaking about the overall dynamics of the amount of materials about Ukraine, it can be seen that there was a weak downward trend in “Novaya Gazeta”. As for “The New York Times”, it remained on about the same level. A simultaneous “surge” in the number of articles from 23 to 27 March could likely have been caused by the fact that at that time in Kiev there were two resonant events that drew the attention of both newspapers’ journalists: the conflict between P. Poroshenko and I. Kolomoisky, and the arrest of two officials from The State Emergency Service of Ukraine during the government meeting. The Russian newspaper also wrote at the time about the death of Viktor Yanukovich’s son on Lake Baikal.

We divided all articles into a number of thematic blocks based on what they were about. Generally speaking, we can say that *Figure 2* is a visual representation of the attribute agenda of the pieces analyzed.



Figure 2

### Topics of “Novaya Gazeta” and “The New York Times” articles (pcs.)



As can be seen, “Novaya Gazeta” devoted much attention to the events in Russia and Ukraine surrounding the armed confrontation in Donbass. “The New York Times” articles devoted to the Ukrainian domestic processes also appeared frequently. The number of articles about Russia dealing with the crisis in southeast Ukraine in the US newspaper was much smaller, but it was fully compensated by a significant number of articles about our country without reference to the events in Donbass. The content of these pieces will be discussed further in this article.

In the meantime, a few words should be said about other “thematic” characteristics of the coverage of conflict in Russia’s neighboring country. For example, it is obvious that the issue of Crimea interested Russian journalists more than two times more often than their US colleagues. A similar ratio is observed in relation to the

issue of compliance with the truce established after the “Minsk-2”. It might seem that there is a clear “divergence” in the attribute agendas of the two newspapers. However, if we analyze the dominant frames in these publications, it becomes clear that this is not the case and that the difference in the number of articles is explained instead by a difference in the number of materials about Ukraine.

Regarding Crimea, “Novaya Gazeta” focused solely on the negative consequences of its “annexation” by Russia: illegal redistribution of businesses on the peninsula, the influx of the criminals from the mainland, the oppression of the Crimean Tatar population, and Crimea’s vague political prospects to name but a few (Kanev, 2015a: 2–3; Kanev, 2015b: 14; Sambros, 2015a: 11; Sambros 2015b: 5). It comes as no surprise that in the “New York Times” the content of the publications on this subject were largely identical: the same “annexation”, Russia’s imperial ambitions, and oppression of Crimean Tatars (MacFarquhar, 2015a: A3; MacFarquhar, 2015c: A4).

As far as the “ceasefire” is concerned, the unifying idea in the two papers is the idea of the truce’s extreme instability and the plight in which, despite a decline in the intensity of fighting, civilians continue to live (Epifanova, 2015: 6; Shenkman, 2015: 15; Shenkman, 2015: A9).

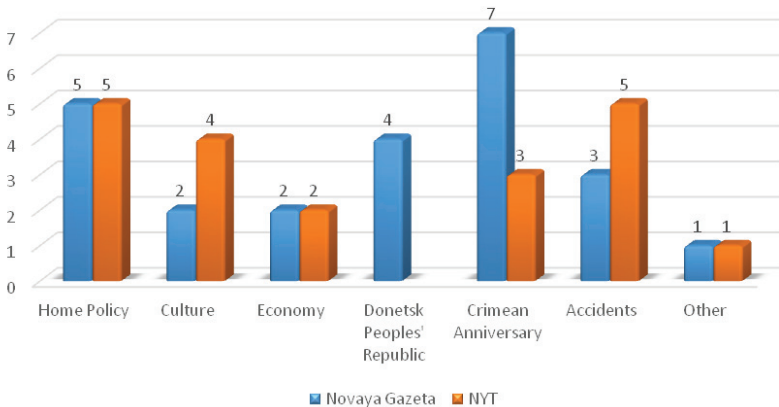
The “diplomacy” block consists of articles about Western sanctions against Russia and contacts of Norman Quartet regarding compliance with the ceasefire. Notable about this is that the two editions differ in assessing the degree of Western unity against Russia. For example, a columnist for “Novaya Gazeta”, A. Mineev, proposes a frame according to which European business, though not particularly thrilled by sanctions against Moscow, in general understands the decisions of their national and European authorities on the matter (Mineev, 2015: 9). “The New York Times” observer S. Erlanger is more pessimistic regarding this matter: “The West,

which seems united, is actually divided over Russia’s actions in Ukraine and what to do about them” (Erlanger, 2015: A8). Thus, in this case we face a situation where the domestic newspaper, in fact, promotes even more skeptical ideas regarding the international political situation concerning Russia than the American one does.

Now it is time to turn to the content of the units, which include the largest number of articles of the newspapers analyzed – “In Russia” and “In Ukraine”. Thematically, we divided these units into several sub-units.

*Figure 3*

**Topics of “Novaya Gazeta” and “The New York Times” articles, belonging to the block “In Russia” (pcs.)**



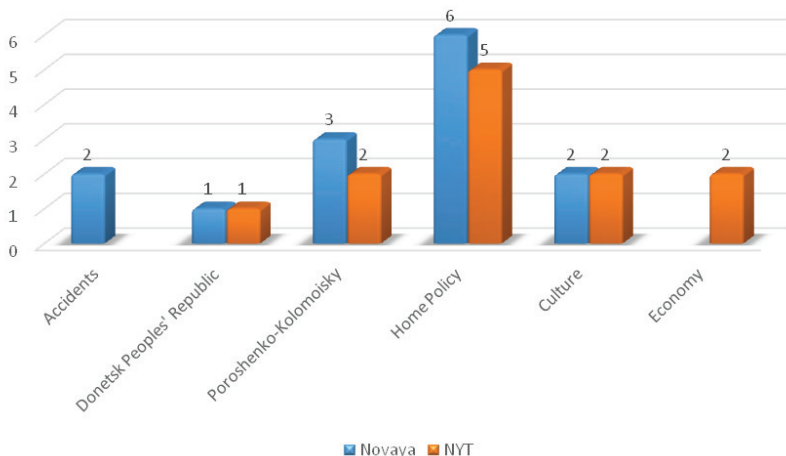
In this case, again, we find examples of how, in spite of the differences in the degrees of “popularity” of individual elements of the attribute agenda, the news outlets’ general attitudes on specific subjects match. This appears most clearly in relation to the articles on the celebration of the anniversary of joining Crimea to Russia.

The difference in the number of these materials is quite substantial (7 vs. 3), but their content easily fits the same frames: pompous celebrations on this occasion are absolutely inappropriate, do not cause much enthusiasm among ordinary people, and were imposed from the top down by authorities (Rybina, 2015: 4; Fomina, 2015: 2–3; Herszenhorn, 2015b: A9).

Common themes of publications on Russian domestic politics in the context of the crisis in southeast Ukraine are also quite indicative/symptomatic. Stories about the International Russian Conservative Forum held in St. Petersburg took a special place in both “Novaya Gazeta” and “The New York Times”. Generally, all evaluations came down to the fact that it was a gathering of right-wing groups loyal to Putin or even “brown” neo-Nazis (according to the Russian newspaper) (MacFarquhar, 2015b: A6; Vishnevskiy, 2015: 1–2; Garmazhapova, 2015: 3).

*Figure 4*

**Topics of “Novaya Gazeta” and “The New York Times” articles, belonging to the block “In Ukraine” (pcs.)**



As for the events in Ukraine, there are similarities not only in the frames conveyed by the two newspapers but also in the quantitative parameters of their attribute agendas. In four out of six selected sub-units (“DPR”, “Poroshenko-Kolomoisky”, “Home Policy” and “Culture”), the differences in numbers of articles are very few if any.

The articles included in the sub-units “Accidents” and “Economy” provide indirect evidence that the domestic paper nourishes even greater sympathy for Ukraine and antipathy toward Russia than the US one. For example, the journalists of “Novaya Gazeta” unambiguously suggest that terrorist attacks in cities outside the area of the so-called “anti-terror operation”, were prepared by pro-Russian forces (Yakushko, 2015: 7; Polukhina, 2015: 6). “The New York Times” does not risk drawing such bold conclusions and, instead, talks about numerous Ukrainian economic problems (Kramer, 2015: B7; Herszenhorn, 2015a: A3). In our opinion, this is an example of a situation in which not so much a theory of framing as the analysis of attributive agendas allows a researcher to draw conclusions about the editorial policy of a particular publication.

In this study, we also analyzed another issue that arguably takes a boundary position between the theories of framing and attribute agenda setting, i.e. when the journalists used links to other opinions, often in the form of quotations. We selected several groups of those whose words or opinions were cited in articles. Those who held any official position or office in Russia, Ukraine, Europe, or the US – officials, MPs, heads of government agencies, etc. – were included in “officials” (apart from presidents Putin and Poroshenko, whom we referred to as separate units). The block “experts” consists of scholars, analysts, and specialists in various fields. We put everybody directly related to the self-proclaimed republics in the “DPR-LPR” block. “Anonymous” is what we called unnamed sources and those

whose names had been intentionally modified by the articles' authors. Ordinary citizens whose opinions are particularly common in reports, mini-interviews, etc. were categorized as "locals".

*Table 1*

**Sources of citations in "Novaya Gazeta"  
and "The New York Times" articles (pcs.)**

Citations	"Novaya Gazeta"				"The New York Times" (about Ukraine)				"The New York Times" (about Russia)			
	+	=	-	Σ	+	=	-	Σ	+	=	-	Σ
Russian officials	12	7	2	<b>21</b>	3	-	3	<b>6</b>	15	16	5	<b>36</b>
Ukrainian officials	7	21	8	<b>36</b>	-	23	5	<b>28</b>	-	-	-	-
EU officials	6	4	5	<b>15</b>	-	2	-	<b>2</b>	10	12	8	<b>30</b>
US officials	-	-	1	<b>1</b>	-	-	3	<b>3</b>	-	8	5	<b>13</b>
V. Putin	1	1	-	<b>2</b>	5	4	-	<b>9</b>	3	1	-	<b>4</b>
P. Poroshenko	-	6	-	<b>6</b>	-	6	3	<b>9</b>	-	-	-	-
Russian experts	2	4	23	<b>29</b>	2	-	2	<b>4</b>	-	11	15	<b>26</b>
Ukrainian experts	-	13	-	<b>13</b>	-	10	-	<b>10</b>	-	-	-	-
EU experts	-	15	6	<b>21</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
US experts	2	3	2	<b>7</b>	1	3	1	<b>5</b>	-	2	-	<b>2</b>
DPR-LPR	-	3	-	<b>3</b>	3	1	-	<b>4</b>	-	1	-	<b>1</b>
Locals	2	53	23	<b>78</b>	-	3	1	<b>4</b>	-	5	3	<b>8</b>
Anonymous	-	2	3	<b>5</b>	-	3	-	<b>3</b>	-	-	-	-
Other	-	6	2	<b>8</b>	-	-	-	-	1	2	3	<b>6</b>

We have tried to evaluate each of the quotations in terms of its tone with regard to Russia: if the statement was positive with respect to our country, it was marked with "+"; if the quote in one way or another implied criticism or disapproval, with "-"; if an opinion was generally neutral it was marked with "=".

specify that we are aware of a certain degree of subjectivity in this approach. Phrases that we regarded as critical might well seem neutral to someone else, etc. To avoid such a mess, we used coders and other mechanisms to improve intercoder reliability<sup>3</sup>. In that sense, the data on the total number of citations of a particular source given above appears to be much more “robust / proved to be true”. It is marked yellow for convenience.

Moving from the top of the table to the bottom, we notice a number of very interesting correlations. For example, it seems quite significant that most of the US and Ukrainian officials whose opinions journalists from “The New York Times” had reported/sought out, spoke neutrally or negatively about “Moscow”. It is also interesting that “Novaya Gazeta” referred to the words of P. Poroshenko three times more often than to those of V. Putin. The US newspaper quoted the presidents approximately the same number of times, but a third of the statements by the head of Ukraine were critical of Russia.

Several things can be noted about the expert community. It is obvious that journalists from the Russian newspaper appealed to domestic experts much more willingly. However, the vast majority of citations we endowed with the “–” sign. In contrast to “The New York Times”, European experts were much more frequent guests on the pages of “Novaya Gazeta”. Furthermore, their opinions were more moderate when compared to their Russian colleagues.

Finally, Russian journalists sought the opinions of ordinary people much more often. Apparently, this can be partly explained by the fact that during the period under review, “Novaya Gazeta” devoted eight extensive stories to the events in southeast Ukraine. It is noteworthy that “locals” spoke “in favor” of Russia only twice,

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<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, we fully acknowledge that all coders had personal backgrounds that could have influenced their evaluations.

neutrally 53 times and negatively 23 times. Among the “anonymous” there were no positive opinions at all.

Summarizing the results of the analysis, we would like to note the following. First of all, based on the results of the selected material, we believe it is possible to confirm the initially suggested hypothesis that concurrent use of framing and attribute agenda-setting theories could be considered one of the most effective mechanisms of exploring media texts. Therefore, we would like to emphasize once again that these structures achieve their maximum cognitive abilities when they are used simultaneously, rather than individually. In this paper we presented specific proof of that. Analysis of the quotations is only one piece of evidence: a better understanding of the editorial policy of media is formed only if we take into account not only quantitative (an element of the attribute agenda setting) but also qualitative (an element of framing) parameters of using the third-party opinions.

Unfortunately, framing and attribute agenda-setting theories are not very popular among Russian scholars, which is especially true for those of them who explore media issues in political terms. Nevertheless, we find the cognitive potential of these approaches rather extensive. They can help scholars to articulate the difference between certain types of political coverage. That is not to say that these two theories are the only way to do it, but they are definitely among the most efficient ways.

The second conclusion is more practical and lies in the fact that approaches to the coverage of events in southeast Ukraine by the Russian opposition paper and by one of the leading American newspapers have much in common. Moreover, in some cases, especially when it comes to assessing Russia’s actions, journalists from “Novaya Gazeta” were sometimes even more critical of “the Kremlin” than their US counterparts.



Recently, we conducted a comparative study analyzing the coverage of events in Donbass by “Novaya Gazeta” and ‘Rossiiskaya Gazeta’, the official print media of the Russian Government (Kazakov, 2015a). The results of that analysis were completely opposite: attribute agendas and frames provided by the papers differed significantly. What does this mean? In our opinion, among other things, it indicates the drastic difference between the coverage of Russian foreign policy by media loyal to the Kremlin on the one hand and opposition and US media on the other. This may not seem unexpected or surprising, but one should always try to prove his or her initial views and suppositions. In this sense, the practical part of the cognitive potential of attribute agenda-setting and framing theory implies an opportunity to do so empirically.

Last but not least, framing and second-level agenda-setting approaches also have the potential to contribute to media literacy skills building. By media literacy we mean an ability to use critical thinking skills to judge the reliability and credibility of news reports whether they come from the press, TV, or the Internet. Being aware of the mechanisms of framing and attribute agenda-setting theories, one would be left less vulnerable to manipulation. However, media literacy is an object for a separate study. The current research has just revealed one way of fostering media literacy principles.

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