

Public debates abound with resonant frames. Political actors, PR sources, even scientists struggle to present interpretations of social reality that appear intuitively plausible and compelling to a wide audience. While the ability to explain complex ideas in terms that relate to and ‘click’ with people’s existing beliefs and understandings is critical for our ability to make sense of social reality, frame resonance can also raise several problematic implications. Enabling people to roughly grasp the meaning of phenomena without a need to examine them in detail, our readiness to accept interpretations as plausible and obvious does not necessarily depend on them being correct, legitimate, or even particularly helpful. Countless myths continue to resonate widely in contemporary discourse, ranging from relatively harmless misperceptions (e.g., of a powerless European democracy, or German punctuality) via politically consequential, stereotypical explanations (e.g., of criminal behavior, corporate job creation, or feminist activism), to dangerous propaganda and conspiracy theories. Also the current rise of populist politics and its reliance on simplified, stereotypical but resonant explanations attests to the importance of the investigation.

RECORD has investigated the phenomenon of frame resonance in the context of violent conflict, where it is arguably both most important, and most problematic: Resonant interpretations in propaganda may mislead the public and cloak inconvenient truths. By contrast, balanced, fact-based narratives that could support mutual understanding and reconciliation often turn out to be more complex and provide ambivalent evaluations – properties usually linked to low resonance. In studying resonant frames in conflict-related discourse, RECORD has specifically focused on explaining what about the construction and content of a specific interpretation renders it more likely to be accepted, reiterated, and thus perpetuated in public debates. The project has developed a theoretical-conceptual framework, which structures the underlying resonance process and enables a targeted investigation of specific junctures; it has built analytic software tools that allow capturing and studying large bodies of public discourse in fine grain; and it applied both to a range of case studies centering around the current conflicts in the Middle East.

As a conceptual framework, RECORD posits that frame resonance can chiefly be understood as the way how present explanations tally with ideas that are already widely accepted, which means that they have been popularized and used in at least roughly similar ways in previous discourse. There are, however, different aspects of this resonance. First, there is ‘epistemic resonance’, which refers to the question whether the kinds of claims made in an explanation are claims that are, by their kind, generally familiar, and also used commonly in similar constellations. For instance, explaining criminality by referring to bad character resonates well in right-wing and conservative contexts, where much emphasis is placed on integrity and obedience, while left-wing debates emphasizing social influences and incentives tend to not consider such explanations highly plausible. Next, there is ‘normative resonance’, which refers to the justification of explanations in accepted values. For instance, explanations invoking sexist ideas fail to resonate in contexts that embrace equal rights and dignity, while they tend to accept explanations that refer to offsetting discrimination as a goal. Third, ‘instrumental’ resonance refers to opportune arguments that happen to support conclusions that a group prefers to draw. For instance, explanations that imply that others have to act to remedy current ills, while oneself one is not called upon to act, tend to resonate in most contexts, especially when blame for current ills is assigned.

These three factors contribute not only to specific ideas being more persisting in specific groups’ discourses, they are also addressed by numerous efforts to fend off challenges by other explanations: Where resonant frames collide with salient observations (e.g., migrants allegedly ‘taking away our jobs’ can’t do so as they don’t

get work permits; violence allegedly supported by entire enemy societies is widely condemned), these anchors are used to repel alternative views as obviously implausible, illegitimate, or untenable in their implications. Resonance is thus actively maintained in public discourse, both by presenting selective evidence and justification supporting existing claims, and by discounting or rebutting alternate perspectives. RECORD has chiefly investigated these mechanisms in four case studies.

In the first study, which I conducted with Katsiaryna Stalpouskaya, we have focused on the maintenance of resonant frames over time. Investigating the coverage of the Syrian chemical weapons crisis in the Russian, British, and US media, we were specifically interested in how each side maintains or adjusts its respective, very different interpretation of events (Russia seeing rebels as culprits, British media condemning Assad, and US views remaining hesitant and inconclusive until late) – even though new evidence and additional insights were brought up frequently. This study has illuminated the various strategies that are used to repel challenges to established ideas.

The second study, which I conducted with Keren Tenenboim-Weinblatt, has focused on the construction of news from available source material. Analyzing news coverage of two abductions and murders – one of three Israeli teenagers murdered by activists linked to Hamas, and another one of a Palestinian teenager murdered by Israeli radicals in retribution – we were interested in how journalists edit the available material to render it relevant and palatable to their respective audiences. Investigating journalists' strategies for selecting, combining, and augmenting explanations provided by specific sources, we have highlighted the mechanisms guiding the construction of frames that stand a chance to resonate in different cultural contexts.

In the third study, which I did with Yossi David, we have compared how the same news events – two lethal attacks by Jewish radicals, one on the Jerusalem Gay Pride Parade, one on a Palestinian family home in Douma – were interpreted differently in different communities' media in Israel. Comparing the frames constructed by Ultra-Orthodox and Settler media, Palestinian media in Israel, Gay community forums, and the mainstream press, we have analyzed how previous news and understandings of the situation inform what sense can, and cannot be given to these novel events. Each group trying to fit the events into its existing world view, we have developed a model that can predict what elements of specific interpretations are likely to be embraced, ignored, or contested, in a given discursive context.

The final study, which is still in progress, is aimed at providing a statistical test of the developed model in large scale, comparative data. Drawing upon the news data set collected by the INFOCORE project, which covers six conflicts in three global regions over many years, I analyze what semantic structures and configurations of a frame predict the survival of its constituent propositions over extended time periods. Specifically, I aim to thus predict frame resonance based on the familiarity of included propositions, the reliance on historical precedents/examples, the inclusion of specific value references, the internal coherence of the constructed explanation, and several further factors. This analysis, which includes several billion propositions traced over four years in news coverage from 10 countries, in eight languages, is still computing at the time of reporting, so I cannot state the results of this analysis yet.

Applications of the insights delivered by RECORD can be found mainly in the analysis of propaganda, hate speech, and populist campaigning, and help gauging the possible impact of circulating myths and distortions. From a journalistic perspective, these insights can help informing a more careful way of reporting especially in situations where tensions are high, possibly contributing to a containment of problematic interpretations. In my future work, I intend to further develop these insights to better understand and potentially counteract social resonance processes that result in explanations and world views that are resilient against facts and argument, and thus inaccessible to democratic debates.

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