

News Coverage of the 2017 Wisconsin and Foxconn Investment Deal: A Framing Analysis of Wisconsin Daily Newspapers

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ABSTRACT: The study examined the news frames embedded in the news regarding the investment deal between the state of Wisconsin and Foxconn in 2017. The deal had generated a considerable amount of debate, especially in the state of Wisconsin since it was the largest-ever subsidy for the state of Wisconsin to have a company invest in the state and the largest government handout to a foreign company ever given in the U.S. A qualitative content analysis on Wisconsin daily newspapers was used to identify the news frames. Five news frames were identified: financial cost/economic growth, risk/government responsibility, transformational opportunity, conflict, and fairness and justice. By examining the news frames embedded in the news stories, this study revealed not only what voices and powers for the 2017 Wisconsin and Foxconn investment deal have been competing in the news discourse, but also how the different voices were addressed in the news discourse.

Keywords: framing analysis content analysis, news analysis.

Introduction

On July 26, 2017, President Trump, Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, and Foxconn CEO Terry Gou together announced an enormous investment deal between the state of Wisconsin and Foxconn. According to the deal, Foxconn, a foreign electronic manufacturer, would invest \$10 billion to build flat-screen display plants in Wisconsin and create 13,000 jobs. In exchange, Wisconsin agreed to provide \$3 billion in tax credits and incentives to Foxconn. With other additional incentives and costs provided by local and state governments, the total subsidy added up to about \$4 billion (Isidore, 2018). By far, this investment deal is the largest-ever subsidy for the state of Wisconsin to have a company invest in the state and the largest government handout to a foreign company ever given in the U.S. (Isidore, 2018; Murphy, 2018).

Not surprisingly, the 2017 Wisconsin and Foxconn deal generated a considerable amount of debate from those for and against the deal. News outlets, one of the primary sources of information for the public, allow citizens to become aware of issues, be

informed and evaluate policies and events. News rarely is published as a list of bulleted facts without further explanation. Instead, journalists work as watchdogs of the government and power holders. Thus, news stories are written with some perspectives that serve audiences' needs for surveillance and correlations. The selected perspectives or elements emphasized in the news stories are the news frames (Entman, 1993). News frames impact audiences by helping them evaluate the news events and further affect their understanding, attitudes, and/or behaviors regarding the news events. For instance, Cho and Gower's (2006) experimental study for the news frames in crisis communication found that compared to the *non-human interest* frame, the *human interest* frame was more likely to influence participants' emotional response to a crisis. Further, the emotional response influenced by the *human interest* frame predicted the blame and responsibility in a transgression crisis. Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley's (1997) study found that compared to "disruption of public order" frames, news frames emphasizing "free speech" resulted in higher tolerance toward a Ku Klux Klan rally, which supported the notion that news

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frames could impact audiences' attitudes toward news events.

Since the Wisconsin and Foxconn deal was announced, the voices of support and opposition have been competing in the public sphere. This deal became one of the primary criticisms for Scott Walker in the 2018 gubernatorial race during the midterm election. During the campaign, Democrat gubernatorial candidate Tony Evers said to the public, "[j]ust about anyone could've cut a better deal with Foxconn than Scott Walker did...With Foxconn, it's been asterisk after asterisk and their end of the bargain seems to change by the day. It's a lousy deal, and we're going to have to hold Foxconn's feet to the fire going forward" (Torres, 2018).

On the other hand, Gov. Scott Walker defined this deal as "a once-in-a-century opportunity for our state and our country," and said it would give Wisconsin its own version of Silicon Valley (Isidore, 2018). To respond to the skepticisms and criticisms, Scott Walker stated "they're just upset because they think this is a major victory for me" (Beck & Sommerhauser, 2017). Walker also said his critics "can go suck lemons" (The Associated Press & Kremer, 2018).

In the news and public discourse, different voices competed to advocate, question, or oppose the 2017 investment deal of Wisconsin and Foxconn. It is not clear at this moment whether Tony Evers' criticisms for this deal played a role in his winning the election. However, we could expect that the selected perspectives addressed about this investment deal in the news could impact audiences' cognitions and attitudes toward it. Thus, the purpose of this research is to examine what dominant frames and tones were used and presented in the news stories to address the 2017 investment deal of Foxconn and Wisconsin.

Literature Review

News Frame

A news frame refers to a central organizing idea that provides a template that guides journalists in writing news stories and provides audiences with cues or schemas to interpret the information as well (Gamson, 1992). For news frames, Entman (1993) defines,

"To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem

definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatments recommendation" (p.52).

Thus, one of core functions of framing is to define issues (Van Gorp, 2010), which allows news framing could be viewed "as the construction of social reality" (Scheufele, 1999, p.104).

News framing analysis can be categorized into two areas. One is to analyze a type of news, such as political news, for a significant period of time to identify generic, common frames. Another is to focus on a specific issue, such as immigration and global warming, to explore the issue-specific frames. For the analysis of generic frames, Neuman, Just, and Crigler conducted one of the pioneer works on this subject in 1992. The researchers conducted a content analysis on a wide range of media contents, including national newspapers, newsmagazines, and television networks. In their work, five common frames were identified for political news, including economic frame (emphasizes profit and loss or capital values), conflict frame (emphasizes winner and loser, a horse-race politics), powerlessness frame (presents status quo as victim), human impact frame (emphasizes the impacts on individuals or groups), and morality frame (emphasizes moral values, such as justice/injustice).

Continuing Neuman et al.'s 1992 work, Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) analyzed 2,601 newspaper stories and 1,522 television news stories regarding the Amsterdam meetings of European heads of state in 1997. The researchers also found five common news frames: attribution of responsibility, conflict, economic consequence, human interest, and morality. Overall, attribution of responsibility in which the government, an individual, or a group is responsible for the cause or solution was the most commonly used in news. The study also found a significant difference between sensationalist and serious types of news outlets. Sober and serious news outlets more often used attribution of responsibility and conflict frames, whereas sensationalist outlets more often used human interest frames.

Several studies adapted Semetko and Valkenburg's (2000) five common frames in framing analysis. For instance, a study for the 2014 West Virginia Elk River chemical spill found that the attribution of responsibility was the most dominant frame, followed by the human interest, conflict, economic consequences, and morality frames (Thomas, Kannaley, Friedman, Tanner, Brandt, & Spencer, 2016). Similarly, An and Gower's (2009) study also found attributions of responsibility was the dominant frame in crisis news coverage.

Issue-oriented framing analysis emphasizes the unique frames specific for the news event. For instance, Kuehn (2018) studied the mass surveillance debate on New Zealand's news outlets after Edward Snowden, former National Security Agency (NSA) contractor-turned-whistleblower, released top secret documents. The study found three issue-oriented frames from newspapers: lawfulness, conflict, and democratic values. Another study examined the news frames of Syria's use of chemical weapons on August 21, 2013, from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*; that study found attributions of responsibility and conflicts were the most common frames (Cozma & Kozman, 2015).

In summary, framing analysis on a specific issue might find generic frames that are commonly used in news, such as attribution of responsibility and conflict. It also could identify specific frames that reflect the unique situation of the issue. The present study used both generic and issue-oriented framing analysis to examine the news coverage of the 2017 Wisconsin and Foxconn investment deal.

News Frames on Economic Issues

News coverage of economic issues affects the public's perceptions of and attitudes toward the economic condition. Further, it could affect people's reactions toward economic policies. Schuck and de Vreese (2006) conducted a multi-methodological study to examine the news frames used in the news coverage of the 2004 European Union enlargement and to explore the impact of news frames on individuals' attitudes toward the European Union enlargement. First, the content analysis revealed that risk and opportunity was the dominant frame. In terms of the tone of news, their study found that overall, there was no significant difference between the amount of positive news or negative news. Further, the study used an experimental design to investigate whether exposure to different frames (risk vs. opportunity) would affect individuals' attitudes toward the 2004 European Union enlargement. The results confirmed that people's attitudes toward a news event indeed could be affected by the news frames. The individuals who were exposed to risk frame were induced more negative thoughts regarding the European Union enlargement and tended to less support the European Union enlargement. On the other hand, the individuals who were exposed to the opportunity frame were induced more positive thoughts and appeared to be more positive to the European Union enlargement.

Similarly, de Vreese, Boomgaarden, and Semetko's (2011) analysis on the news frames and effects on the public's support for Turkish membership

in the European Union (EU). Their study identified three dominant news frames: cultural threat/benefit, economic threat/benefit, and security threat/benefit. The further experimental study confirmed that the individuals exposed to benefit framing were more positive about Turkish EU membership than those in a threat-framing condition. Moreover, based on the effect size, negative frames appeared to have a stronger effect on participants' attitudes toward Turkish EU membership. The authors argued the result was consistent with previous studies that suggested a negative frame could generate negative emotions such as fear and anger which resulted in stronger effects.

Sakurai (2015) applied a qualitative content analysis approach to study how the *Wall Street Journal* presented the Super 301, a trade policy, that allows the U.S. government to investigate and take actions to remove the unfair trade barriers between the U.S. and foreign countries. The study selected 20 years, a total of 50 news articles. The study proposed five frames used in the news coverage for the Super 301: fair-unfair, "war" context, personification, threat, and two-way street. The most dominant frame was fair-unfair frame which simplified the complexity of an international trading issue by comparing what is fair and what is unfair for the U.S.

In short, frames play an essential role in defining the news events and further construct the social reality that would affect the public's attitudes and/or behaviors toward the news events. Studies also showed that the tones of news either negative or positive could affect the public's attitudes toward the event (e.g., Schuck & de Vreese, 2006; Entman, Matthes, & Pellicano, 2009). Thus, the research questions addressed in this study included:

RQ1: What are the dominant frames in the news stories regarding the investment deal between Wisconsin and Foxconn?

RQ2: What is the dominant tone in the news stories regarding the investment deal between Wisconsin and Foxconn?

Method

Samples

A qualitative content analysis approach was used to analyze the news frames for the 2017 investment deal of Wisconsin and Foxconn. To include all major voices regarding the deal that competed in the news discourse, this study gathered both printed and online news published on the first day of the deal

announced (July 26, 2017) to two weeks after the deal contract signed by former Governor Scott Walker and Foxconn CEO Terry Gou (November 24, 2017).

News samples were collected from the top two daily newspapers in Wisconsin by circulation, the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* and the *Wisconsin State Journal* (Cision, 2016). The search keyword "Foxconn" was used to collect articles from both print and online formats. The news articles of the *Wisconsin State Journal* were gathered from the LexisNexis database and a total of 174 articles were collected. The news articles of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* were gathered from the NewsBank database and a total of 449 articles were collected. After removing duplicates, reader comments, and the articles that were irrelevant to the 2017 Wisconsin and Foxconn deal, a total of 131 news reports and 63 opinion or editorial articles were included in this study (see Table 1).

Table 1: Numbers of Articles

	News Report	Opinion/Editorial Articles
The <i>Wisconsin State Journal</i>	50	19
The <i>Milwaukee Journal Sentinel</i>	81	44
Sum	131	63

Analytical Strategy

To identify the dominant news frames, an inductive framing analysis approach that incorporated generic frames and issue-specific frames was used. The analysis unit was the entire article (including the headline but exclude images) in the news. Pan and Kosicki (1993) emphasized that framing analysis is an approach to analyze news discourse. Thus, guided by framing and discourse analysis (Huckin, Andrus & Clary-Lemon, 2012; Pan & Kosicki, 1993), the analytical strategy of this study involved three stages: first, a casual reading to obtain an overall idea about what voices and information were published (e.g. the information of financial incentives/investment and the arguments of support or opposition) and the tones were conveyed (favorable or unfavorable toward the deal). Favorable tone referred to present the deal as a positive condition, such as the increase of jobs and economic growth. The unfavorable tone referred to present the deal as a negative condition such as budget burden and

pollutions. Next, a close reading strategy was used to seek, list, differentiate, group and re-group the thematic messages to identify the news frames. Gamson and Modigliani's (1989) articulation about framing devices including metaphor, exemplar, catchphrases, and descriptions were used to locate framing elements. According to Mattes and Kohring (2008), framing elements could be a problem definition, a casual interpretation, a more evaluation and a treatment recommendation addressed in news. By doing so, this study was able to systemically explore the repeated thematic messages and then to identify the frames. Aletheide's (1996) characterizations for themes and frames provided guidelines to explore themes and identify frames. According to Altheide (1996), themes are "recurring typical theses" and frames are more distinct "focus" (p.31). An exemplar of a theme in both the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* and the *Wisconsin State Journal* was gamer changer, once-a-generation opportunity, state-of-the-art technology, etc., which was identified as transformational opportunity framing. After the news frames were identified and defined, the last stage was to code and recode the news articles for the news frames, tones, and sources. Besides the author, an independent coder was trained by the author to conduct the coding. Both the independent coder and the author coded all news articles and then compared their coding works. If there were differences and disagreements in coding, both coders discussed the discrepancies until to reach an agreement.

Findings

This study identified five sets of major frames used in the news coverage of the 2017 Wisconsin and Foxconn investment deal. They are financial cost/economic growth, transformational opportunity, risk and government responsibility, conflict, and fairness and justice. Transformational opportunity and economic growth frames appeared to be favorable for the Wisconsin and Foxconn deal. On the other, financial cost, risk and government responsibility, conflicts, and fairness and justice could be considered as unfavorable frames since these frames articulated challenges, negative consequences, and/or morality. Even though the news coverage of the 2017 Wisconsin and Foxconn deal tended to cover both sides of the opinions, the unfavorable tone was presented by various frames that rarely could not be missed for the individuals who regularly exposed to the news of the 2017 Wisconsin and Foxconn investment deal. Further articulation for the news frames addressed below.

Financial Cost/Economic Growth

The most dominant frame was financial cost/economic growth. The financial cost/economic growth frame was operationalized by an article covering the gains and/or loss of financial revenue for the state of Wisconsin or taxpayers. This frame was used for both news reports and opinion or editorial articles. Financial cost framing and economic growth framing usually co-existed at the same time. This could be explained by the journalism routines and the professional journalist codes that expect journalists to include all sides of opinions and to be unbiased. However, this does not suggest that the majority of news with the financial cost and economic growth frame was neutral for the Wisconsin and Foxconn deal. Some news coverages articulated more about the cost of the incentives the state of Wisconsin offered and some reports emphasized the economic growth and gains once Foxconn materialized the investment plan. Particularly, the economic growth framing seemed to be more apparent during the time the deal was just announced. For instance, on the first of the deal announced, the headline stated “[p]eople in Racine say they need more jobs, and Foxconn has them” (Noemig, 2017). According to Gus Ramirez, an industrial leader interviewed by the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, this investment deal is “fabulous for Wisconsin. The job growth and the byproducts of having that sort of business...is just fabulous” (Barrett, 2017). Similarly, on July 30, 2017, the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* reported that “Foxconn supply chain could bring opportunities to Wisconsin businesses” and “large and small companies may benefit.” (Barrett, 2017).

On the other hand, after more information regarding the incentives revealed, the more detailed financial cost was presented in the news discourse. The news articulated how long the state of Wisconsin will take to recoup the cost and/or how much Foxconn could receive from the state. The “taxpayers would need until 2043 to recoup nearly \$3 billion in Foxconn payments” (Stein, 2017a). Similarly, another news coverage from the *Wisconsin State Journal* stated “[p]layoff starts in 25 years; Foxconn analysis shows state budget drain until 2043” (Beck, 2017). Moreover, the criticisms regarding the deal were more apparent in opinion or editorial articles. Foxconn deal “is way too expensive” (Conroy, 2017) and the Wisconsin taxpayers are “Foxconn’s cash cow” (Haynes, 2017).

Risk and Government Responsibility Frames

Another dominant news frame was risk and government responsibility. Risk and government responsibility were frequently included in the same

news article. Thus, this study merged these two concepts into one frame. Risk framing was operationalized by addressing the possibility of not to obtain the returns from Foxconn or negative consequences, especially for the environments. Government responsibility referred to the articulations of what should be done by the government to protect taxpayers from the loss of the incentives offered. Foxconn’s records of broken promises for their previous investment claims were often used to rationalize the risk of trusting Foxconn. “Foxconn agreement demands diligence” because “Foxconn has a long history of over-promising and under-delivering on its claims of investments and job creation (Ross, 2017). Additionally, the risk and responsibility frame articulated the unpredictable future in the technology industry and labor market in manufacture to advocate the needs of more actions to protect the Wisconsin taxpayers. “[I]t’s worth wondering: Will there even be iPhone in 25 years?” (Wachs, 2017). And, “taxpayers deserve a guarantee from the company for a minimum number of jobs, given the enormous amount of investment taxpayers are being asked to make” (Wisconsin State Journal editorial board, 2017). It’s worth noting that in the discourse of risk, instead of “Taiwan-based Foxconn,” a “foreign” corporation or a “foreign” company was often used to reinforce the uncertainty and define the ingroup and outgroup. This rhetoric strategy could create more fear of the deal and support the arguments of risk.

Transformational Opportunity Frame

Instead of addressing the financial gains of the deal, the transformational opportunity frame emphasized the positive changes and the transformation of Wisconsin would obtain once Foxconn located in Wisconsin. The words of “transformational”, “game-changer”, or “once-in-a-lifetime” was especially advocated by the state’s government officials and the deal supporters. For them, the investment deal will not only provide jobs but also will generate catalytic effects. “Foxconn’s already talked about investing in a venture fund here to get people to develop their technology platform,” quoted from Tim Sheehy, president of the Metropolitan Milwaukee Associate of Commerce. (Romell, 2017). Foxconn planned “a huge, advanced-manufacturing campus” in Wisconsin and “Foxconn’s demand for labor may be unlike anything Wisconsin has seen for decades” (Romell, 2017). UW System President Ray Cross believed that “Foxconn project would be ‘transformative’ for the state and would ‘catapult’ the state university system into a ‘position of global prominence’ through partnerships, internship and

research opportunities” (Still, 2017). The winning of Foxconn could “take Wisconsin business to the next level” (Stein, 2017b). And, the governor Scott Walker called it “Wisconsin Valley.”

Conflict Frame

Another dominant frame was conflict, which was operationalized by a news article presenting the pro and con arguments or describing the reactions from the deal supporters and opponents. For instance, the article of “Foxconn Incentive Advances” stated, “after the chambers Republicans cheered it as a smart bet for taxpayers with massive upside for the state’s economy and over Democrats’ criticism that the deal is a gigantic gamble with state funds” (Sommerhauser Beck, 2017). The primary news sources were Republican and Democratic politicians. Most news coverages included both favorable arguments and unfavorable arguments. The rhetoric strategy from the Republican officials lied on either the emphasis of the “transformational opportunity” for Wisconsin or blamed the Democratic lawmakers’ irrational reactions to the deal. For instance, the Republican lawmakers stated, “Democrats are so desperate to score a few cheap political points that they are willing to put hard-working families at risk by creating a chilling effect on investment and job creation” (Stein, 2017c). On the other hand, Democrats not only attacked the deal in terms of the price that would burden state budget but also criticized and blamed the Republican officials, especially governor Scott Walker. For them, Walker was irresponsible and uncompetitive for his jobs. “It certainly seems to be a stroke of luck that they (Foxconn) found our Gov. Walker in full re-election mode, desperate to distract from his sub-par jobs record” (Ross, 2017). And, Andy Gronik, a Democratic candidate for governor in 2017 stated that if the state were a company and he were on the corporate board, he would “deny the deal” and “fire Scott Walker (as the company CEO)” (Stein, 2017c).

Fairness/Justice Frame

The 2017 Wisconsin and Foxconn investment deal was also framed as an unfair or even unjust deal the state of Wisconsin offered to Foxconn. Fairness/Justice frame was operationalized by a news article addressing the values of “free market” or equal treatments. Additionally, localism was often associated with the frame of fairness. The deal is “the largest corporate welfare giveaway in the history of the state,” criticized by Rep. David Bowen (Bowen, 2017). The fairness/justice framing emphasized instead of having the rich get richer, there should be a better way to boost the economy, which is to support local ordinary people.

An opinion article by Marjorie Kelly (2017) stated “When businesses are locally owned, dollars recirculate locally. Wealth is created locally. Employee ownership is a way to begin rebuilding the middle class, a way to help ordinary Americans create economic security.”

Discussion

This study applied a qualitative content analysis approach to examine the news frames used in the 2017 Wisconsin and Foxconn deal. Guided by both generic and issue-oriented framing analysis, this study identified five major frames: financial cost/economic growth, transformational opportunity, risk and government responsibility, conflict, and fairness and justice. Overall, the news balanced two sides of opinions by presenting the arguments from both supporters and opponents. Even though the news coverage tended to include two sides of arguments, the unfavorable tone toward the deal appeared to have more opportunities to be consumed since there were more negative frames than positive frames presented in the news discourse of the Wisconsin and Foxconn deal. Further, studies have suggested that negative frames could have stronger effects than positive effects (de Vreese, et al., 2011; Schuck & de Vreese, 2006).

A poll surveyed the residents in Milwaukee and surrounding counties published in 2017, found divided feelings on Foxconn deal. Forty-eight percent of survey takers thought the state pay more than the Foxconn’s plant is worth and 65 percent said they would not personally benefit (Marquette University, 2017). A newer poll surveyed voters for the 2018 midterm election published on March 5th, 2018 showed a similar trend that only 25 percent said the deal will benefit their area and 66 percent said the deal will not benefit them (Johnson, 2018). Overall it is fair to say the majority of taxpayers in Wisconsin did not perceive the benefits of the deal but was aware of the cost of the deal. Currently, it is unknown whether the news frames used in the coverage of the deal directly contributed to the poll results. However, it is reasonable to argue that the economic growth frame and transformational opportunity frame were unsuccessful to persuade their audiences to think the deal favorable. Perhaps, for the majority of taxpayers in Wisconsin, the growth and transformation might be too remote but the pain of giveaway and state budget burden could be so real right after the deal inked.

Limitation

Several limitations should be addressed. First, the timeline of data included in this study is somewhat arbitrary. Even though the news articles collected in this

study covered the important timeline, from the first day of the deal announced to two weeks after the deal sealed, the debate of Wisconsin and Foxconn investment deal lasted years. Especially during the 2018 midterm elections, the competitions between political parties and the gubernatorial candidates raised more disputes and conflicts for this issue. The findings would be more complete if the timeline of the data extended to the 2018 midterm elections. The second limitation has to do with the methodology used in this study. This study acknowledges that the analyses and interpretations of the texts are somewhat subjective and reflect the author's views on the relationship between the meanings of the news and readers in the community. This study considers news as one of the practices that not only delivers news events but also provides frameworks that guide readers how to and what to interpret the news events, which could affect readers' perceptions of reality. Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model articulates readers' ability to resist dominant meanings, but this study did not take readers' interpretations into account.

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