

## **Framing the Financial Crisis: An unexpected interaction between the government and the press**

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### **Abstract**

This study explores the dynamic interaction between government and news media in the frame-building process, the process of shaping journalistic news frames, during the financial crisis that erupted in September 2008. The unexpected as well as event-driven character of the financial crisis is expected to create dynamics that challenge journalists' dependence on powerful political actors as the national government by opening up the news gate wider to various voices and perspectives. However, the findings of this study indicate unexpected results as the government dominates the frame-building process.

In order to empirically explore the frame-building process, this paper employs framing theory to analyse political actors' messages and news media coverage. The study employs two sets of data, the first a content analysis of news coverage and the second a content analysis of political messages, during a three month period in Sweden following the eruption of the financial crisis. Overall, the results of this study indicate that powerful political actors' ability to influence frame-building follows the predictable pattern of indexing also during an unexpected event thus limiting press independence.

Keywords: frame-building, event-driven news, indexing, official dominance, media independence.

### **Introduction**

Research has yielded strong support for the argument that political actors have influence over how issues and events are framed in the news media (L. W. Bennett, 1996; W. L. Bennett & Livingston, 2003; Campbell, 2004; R. M. Entman, 2004; Gans, 1979). At the same time research supports the claim that media independence entails that journalists have the final say regarding the framing of issues and events (Aalberg, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2012; Cook, 2005; Strömbäck & Nord, 2006). Due to these conflicting findings the relationship between political actors and news media is often characterized by interdependence where influence on news content work both ways (Bennett and Livingston 2003; Lawrence 2010). Frame-building, the process of shaping news media frames, accordingly involves an interaction between political actors and news media (Callaghan & Schnell, 2001; Norris, Kern, & Just, 2003; Zhou & Moy, 2007). However, the process of frame-building addresses a central question in news framing research concerning how independently news media frame issues and events. Previous research claim that political actors can dominate the frame building

process by being one of the most important sources in news promoting their preferred frames (Bennett 1996; Entman 2004; Wolfsfeld and Sheafer 2006) but that this dominance is dependent on the context of news coverage. The dominance of official political actors can sometimes be limited by the dynamic of unforeseen events encouraging independent news framing (W. L. Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2007).

Occasionally an unexpected event challenges established patterns in the news process and opens up opportunities as well as challenges for political actors, other issue advocates and journalists in the frame-building process (Regina G. Lawrence, 2000; Wolfsfeld, 2004; Wolfsfeld & Sheafer, 2006). In 2008 the dramatic event of the financial crisis received significant news coverage worldwide and journalists had to make sense of, explain and thus frame the unconventional phenomenon of a financial crisis. Based on the theorizing of event-driven news (Lawrence, 2010), the unexpected character of the financial crisis could create dynamics that challenged journalists' dependence on powerful political actors and national governments by opening up the news gate wider to various voices and perspectives. In other words, the financial crisis could limit official dominance and provide room for independent news framing.

Against this background, the purpose of this paper is to study the interaction between political actors and news media in the frame-building process during the 2008 financial crisis in Sweden. Since the crisis affected not only the financial sector but also the economy as a whole, it became an important political issue as well. It was thus important for the government to frame the crisis in order to explain what happened, why it happened, the repercussions and how they would handle the ensuing financial and economic crisis. Empirically, the study combines two content analyses, one of the government's and the opposition's communication and the other of news media coverage during a three-month period of the 2008 financial crisis in Sweden. By investigating the news media's use of powerful political sources the study explores whether the indexing norm is challenged by this unexpected event. To explore frame-building the paper employs framing theory to analyse political actors' messages and news media content. Furthermore it analyses the politician journalist interaction in the frame-building process by examining the salience of different political actors' frames in comparison with media frames during different phases of the financial crisis. Before presenting the research design of the study, its findings and conclusions, the literature on news framing will be examined.

### **Frame-building, indexing and event-driven news**

The concept of framing is closely related to the notion of problem definition and framing research is concerned with the selection and emphasis of different perspectives on an issue or an event (Callaghan & Schnell, 2001; Cappella & Jamieson, 1996; D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2010; R. Entman, 1993; Reese, Gandy, & Grant, 2001;

Schaffner & Sellers, 2009; Sellers, 2010; Zhou & Moy, 2007). According to Entman's (1993: p. 52) classical definition, framing is 'to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text'. Entman (1993) also identifies four important functions of frames: they define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgements, and suggest remedies. The central dimension of a frame involves the selection, organization and emphasis of particular aspects of reality as well as the exclusion of other aspects (De Vreese, 2010). Frames can be regarded as patterns of presentation offering a coherent interpretation and evaluation of events, actors and actions. Thus, the potential power and consequences of frames relate to their function of defining reality, judging actions and setting the terms of political debate.

The tradition of framing research is usually concerned with framing in the news media and framing effects on public opinion (D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2010; Reese et al., 2001; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). However, more than a decade ago Scheufele stated, 'This research, however, has not determined *how* media frames are formed or the types of frames that result from this process' (1999: p. 115) and further argued that research should address the process of frame-building and the potential sources of influence on the framing of news content. Following this call, research on framing has over the last decade produced several studies examining news media framing of political issues and events with a focal question concerning to what extent the news media is independent in framing or whether powerful political actors dominate the news media with their preferred frames (Althaus, 2003; D'angelo, 2006; R. M. Entman, 2004; R.G. Lawrence, 2010). The question of 'where frames derive from' has been approached from different perspectives based on the idea of different types of politician journalist interactions (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995) as the construction of news and frames in news stories is regarded as a joint production (Wolfsfeld & Sheafer, 2006).

Frame building involves interaction between different political actors and the news media in a dynamic process (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Scheufele, 1999; Zhou & Moy, 2007), where both access to media and independence norms are influential. One important theoretical explanation for official dominance in news media is provided by the indexing hypothesis, which predicts how journalists index the range of viewpoints expressed in political debate (W. L. Bennett, 1990). Based on Bennetts indexing theory, research has concluded that official voices are the main constructors of news frames since official political actors are the most prevalent voices and political actors trigger most political news stories (R. M. Entman, 2003; Shehata, 2010; Wolfsfeld & Sheafer, 2006). Despite that indexing attempts to explain what stories and voices will receive the greatest news coverage and thus is analytically distinct from news framing which is concerned with the selection and emphasis of different perspectives in news, sources undoubtedly influence frame-building (Lawrence, 2010). Because the dominant voices in news media are likely to be the ones with power over issues and the views presented, the news is more likely to reflect their perspectives and understanding. In other words: sources promote their frames (Lawrence, 2010). Numerous studies have observed how

political actors construct frames and actively attempt to influence media coverage (Callaghan & Schnell, 2001; Schaffner & Sellers, 2009; Sellers, 2010; Sheaffer & Gabay, 2009).

Nevertheless, contemporary research argues that different conditions and contexts impact whether news frames are predominantly influenced by external or internal factors of the news media (Callaghan & Schnell, 2001; Livingston & Bennett, 2003; Shehata, 2007; Wolfsfeld & Sheaffer, 2006). Lawrence (2000) distinguishes between event-driven news and institutionally-driven news and argues that depending on what drives the news coverage there exists different challenges for journalistic norms and routines as well as source dominance in news framing. Event-driven news initiated by the appearance of dramatic and unexpected events challenge indexing norms by opening up possibilities for actors other than official politicians to influence news coverage. Unexpected events also challenge journalistic framing norms and routines by offering greater framing freedom as viewpoints and frames are expected to proliferate (W. L. Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2006; R.G. Lawrence, 2010; Shehata, 2007).

The notion that an unexpected event questions the indexing norm and the frame-building process is important in crisis events. As a crisis emerges both political actors and media actors can initially be overwhelmed since no plans or routines for how to deal with the situation or make sense of it exist (W. L. Bennett et al., 2006; Norris et al., 2003). Thus, an unexpected event opens up opportunities and challenges for both various actors and journalists to influence the frame-building process since there are no established frames to follow. According to these theoretical expectations the financial crisis should have created the dynamics that could encourage journalists to include various voices and perspectives in news coverage that opposes the top-down news framing proposed by the original indexing hypothesis. Thus, allowing the news media to be independent and critical of government news management in the frame-building process. The eruption of the financial crisis in 2008 presents an opportunity to assess these expectations on the frame-building process.

### **Framing the financial crisis**

The eruption of the financial crisis in 2008 affected financial markets and economic systems all over the world. Substantial efforts were made and large amounts of economic aid were given by various governments to prevent a financial collapse and an economic crisis impacting societies worldwide, turning the crisis into an important political issue. As the crisis evolved it is reasonable to describe the financial crisis as a complex, multi-faceted and multi-layered process involving numerous actors. Initially the financial crisis was a dramatic event that received significant attention in news coverage worldwide and the news media needed to make sense of this complex and unexpected event. As explained by Schifferes and Coulter (2012: p. 19) 'the role

of journalists in framing news coverage and interpreting events to the general public was crucial'. The amount of coverage also raises the question of journalistic routines and the complexity of the crisis raises questions of journalistic knowledge of financial issues and its effect on framing as general journalists were thrown into financial reporting (Manning, 2012; Schifferes & Coulter, 2012; Tambini, 2010). Furthermore, some research highlights the dominance of elite financial sources in news media coverage of the crisis with the consequence of financial experts gaining a monopoly for defining the issues absent of critical debate (Berry, 2012).

Turning to the Swedish case we first take a look at the norm of routine political journalism and source use in news media that affect frame-building. From a media system perspective, Sweden is considered a democratic corporatist country with strong journalistic professionalism, high levels of newspaper circulation and strong public service broadcasting institutions (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Nord, 2008). Political journalism is guided by professional principles of objectivity and impartiality as well as strong general support for the watchdog function of the media. At the same time, sources representing influential groups in society have substantial influence over the media agenda and journalists rely heavily on trustworthy and powerful sources in newsgathering processes. Despite that, according to Strömbäck and Nord (2006) journalists tend to have the final say regarding the framing and presentation of news.

The framing of the financial crisis in Swedish news media offers a test of the interaction between political actors and news media in the frame-building process during an unexpected event, based on a number of elements. The news coverage was event-driven since the fall of the American bank Lehman Brothers triggered the massive attention to financial crisis news in Swedish media. News media initially focused the American bank crisis and its repercussions with dramatic images of banks collapsing on Wall Street. As the financial crisis developed and also came to effect Swedish banks, the economy and its citizens, the crisis was clearly reflected in Swedish news media by a significant and negative news coverage (Färm et al 2012). The massive attention to financial and economic consequences threatening the Swedish system demanded interpretations by the government and explanations on how the government would handle the ensuing crisis. Thus, the financial crisis became an important political issue supporting the characterization of an event-driven news prediction of various and critical voices competing with powerful political actors' explanations of the crisis. According to the event-driven model these sources might lead to critical and independent news framing challenging the governments preferred framing of the crisis. This leads to the first research question concerning news media coverage:

RQ 1: Which sources did journalists turn to most frequently in news media coverage during the financial crisis?

In order to study the frame-building process one must go beyond just analysing the actual framing of an event and the source used in the news media. Certainly, it is important to study the interpretations offered to journalists by various actors and the government and its political opposition as well. Thus, complementing a news frame analysis this study also includes the analysis of interpretations and explanations of the crisis presented by the government and the opposition in press conferences, press releases and political debates. The event-driven model predicts the emergence of critical counter frames competing with official explanations. As the financial crisis developed into the main news story in Sweden we could thus expect the political opposition to offer interpretations critical of government. So when the news gates open up for more voices to be heard, the frames presented by political oppositions are predicted to influence news framing. Furthermore, the event-driven model suggests that the frame-building function of oppositional voices is more likely for new events where no established frames exist to follow for neither sources nor journalists. However, the absence of political opposition supports the indexing norm allowing governmental framing a dominant position in news media. Research has indicated that the existence of a consistent and organized political opposition is crucial for critical news framing independent of government news management (Bennett et al, 2007; Entman, 2004). As outlined in the theoretical framework, political actors exert most influence on frame-building when presenting their viewpoint as influential sources whereas journalists exert most influence when selecting sources and writing their stories. By comparing the salience of political actors' frames and news media frames it is possible to explore the influence of the opposition and the government on the framing of the crisis and evaluation of different actors handling of the crisis in news coverage. The next research question thus deals with the influence of political actors on journalistic news frames during the financial crisis.

RQ 2: How was the financial crisis framed in news media coverage and did the news media reflect the frames presented by political elites?

## **Method and data**

This study of frame-building during the 2008 financial crisis combines two content analyses, one of the news media content and another of the political messages from governmental and oppositional political actors during the financial crisis. The time period, 15<sup>th</sup> September 2008 until 31<sup>th</sup> December 2008, is divided into three phases corresponding to the different phases of the financial crisis and its development in Sweden. Phase 1 (September 15<sup>th</sup> -October 15<sup>th</sup>) is the initial phase of the financial crisis with the international bank crisis, Phase 2 (October 16<sup>th</sup> -November 15<sup>th</sup>) corresponds to the following economic downturn and Phase 3 (November 16<sup>th</sup> -December 30<sup>th</sup>) is distinguished by the escalation of unemployment. By comparing the

salience of different political actors' frames with that of different news media frames in the different phases it is possible to study the influence and interaction between political actors and news media in the frame-building process. Thus, the research design with time phases enables a longitudinal comparison in order to examine the interaction between politicians and journalists during an unexpected event.

## Data

Two sets of data were used to test the relationship between frames presented by political actors and frames used in the news media. One set of data includes material available from the government web archive of official documents. This set of data consists of press conferences, press releases, official statements, and debate articles as well as parliamentary debates involving both the government and the opposition during the above mentioned time period. The criterion for selecting the material was that it must deal with the financial crisis. The following set of search words was used; economic crisis, financial crisis, economic depression, financial downturn and bank crisis. This dataset consists of 161 units from the period 15<sup>th</sup> September 2008 until 31<sup>th</sup> December 2008. It includes 91 messages from the government and 70 messages from the opposition.

The second set of data is the media content in the form of newspaper articles and newscasts on national TV and radio collected during the same time period as the previous one. The media data is drawn from four main national newspapers namely, *Aftonbladet*, *Expressen*, *Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet*. The first two newspapers are daily tabloids and the second two are daily quality papers. The television news programmes are *Aktuellt*, *Rapport* and *TV4 Nyheterna*. The first two are part of the public service broadcasting company *Sveriges Television* (SVT), whereas the third programme belongs to a commercial station (TV4). The national radio news programmes are *Kvart i fem ekot* and *Ekonomiekot* which are the main news programmes on the public service radio *Sveriges Radio* (SR). The content analysis included 3019 news stories from the following outlets; *Aftonbladet* 134 (4,4%), *Expressen* 112 (3,7%), *Dagens Nyheter* 621 (20,6%), *Svenska Dagbladet* 813 (26,9%), *Aktuellt* 364 (12,2%), *Rapport* 226 (7,5%), *TV4 Nyheterna* 388 (12,8%) and *Sveriges Radio* 361 (11,9%). The criterion for selecting the material was that it must deal with the financial crisis and the same set of search words used for the first dataset; economic crisis, financial crisis, economic depression, financial downturn and bank crisis.

## **Content analysis**

In this study the unit of analysis in the media data set was full news articles and individual news stories, which was defined as a single news story focusing on a particular event or theme. In the political data set the unit of analysis was full press conferences, press releases, official statements, and debate articles as well as individual contributions in parliamentary debates, which was defined as a single message with a particular focus. The unit of analysis varies in many framing studies but full and single news stories are the most widely used methodology and approach in research on news content (Esser, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2012). By using the full news story as unit of analysis it is possible to identify frames embedded in the longer text. Thus, this study also treats different political messages as full and single stories in order to make the political material comparable to news content.

A code sheet with code rules was developed specifically for this study drawing on measures and procedures from previous framing studies of the research team. The same code sheet and rules were used for the content analysis of both sets of data. Every unit was analysed for the presence of a number of different frames as well as the use of different sources. The coders were asked to first determine which specific frame was used to fulfil the function of the dominant definition of the financial crisis. Secondly to determine the dominant evaluative frame used to judge different actors management of the crisis. And finally to identify the use of different sources in news stories. Two trained coders coded the media data set and the author performed the coding of the political data set. To test for reliability two tests were done, one for each data set. First an intercoder reliability test was conducted where two coders recoded ten per cent of all the units in the media data set. 302 news stories were randomly selected and recoded. A reliability test showed an overall intercoder reliability (Holsti) of .80. Second an intracoder reliability check was conducted by recoding ten per cent of all the units in the political data set. 16 units were randomly selected and recoded. The result for the reliability test revealed an overall intracoder reliability (Holsti) of .83.

## **Measurements**

### *Frames defining the financial crisis*

Because problem definition is the central function of a frame (R. M. Entman, 2004) it is important for actors to influence the problem definition of an issue at a specific time in order to influence the interpretation and set the terms of the political debate. In this study we identified six different issue-specific frames to define the dominant characteristic of the financial crisis and its effects on society. A subsample of the political data set was read and coded by the author using a qualitative content analysis in order to capture the range of



definitions of the financial crisis circulating at the time. A total of 20 political messages were coded to identify the range of problem definitions. The six different frame identified and then used in the quantitative content analysis were: (1) a labour market crisis with effects on the labour market, *the Labour market frame*, (2) a state finance crisis effecting the finances of the state, *the Finances of the state frame*, (3) a bank crisis effecting the private banks, *the Bank crisis frame*, (4) a business crisis effecting the business market, *the Business frame* (5) an economic crisis effecting economic growth, *the Economic growth frame* and (6) an economic crisis with effects on private economy, *the Private economy frame*.

#### *Evaluative frames*

Another important and central function of a frame, in addition to the problem definition function, is the ability to make moral judgements by judging actors and thus influence interpretations and evaluations of these actors (R. Entman, 1993). Therefore, we also identified evaluative framing of different actors by asking whether the evaluative tone of an actor's management of the crisis was positive, neutral or negative. In every unit where the actors; government, opposition and/or banks appear, the evaluative frame was also identified. Thus, the evaluative frame depicting how different actors managed the crisis was coded as neutral, positive or negative. The coding instructions based on previous research clearly instructed that an evaluative frame must express a moral judgement of actors' ability to handle the financial crisis.

#### *Sources*

A news source was coded as present when defined as an individual with a directly attributed quote, statement or fact in the news story. The number of sources included in a news story was also coded. When coding sources in the news stories, a number of different source categories were defined and included in the content analysis. The source categories used in this study were as follows: politicians (elected officials), ordinary citizens (those who get to speak as ordinary people and not due to any position in a party or organisation), journalists (people identified as working for the media exempt the reporter covering the story) and experts (people with comprehensive or authoritative knowledge in the subject).

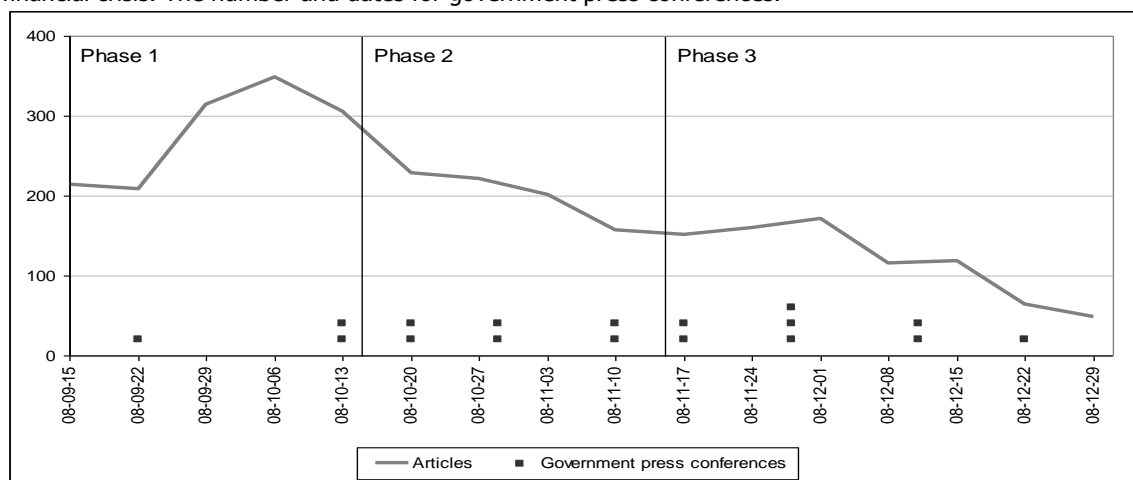
### **Findings**

News media coverage of the financial crisis in Sweden during the fall of 2008 was extensive. Overall, a maelstrom of negative news characterized Swedish media coverage. The fall of Lehman Brothers in September 2008 marks a starting point for the substantial increase in attention devoted to economic issues. Initially Swedish news media focused on the international repercussions of the crisis painting a dark picture

of the worldwide socio-economic future. As the crisis developed and came to effect the Swedish economy and society the focus in news coverage turned to negative consequences for Swedish banks, economy, labour market and business. As illustrated in Figure 1, the crisis coverage exploded in the first phase of the crisis but remained as an important issue on the news agenda during the following phases.

The massive attention to the financial crisis in news media, with increasing focus on socioeconomic consequences for Sweden, turned the financial crisis into a dominant political issue as well. However, political actors' initial response to the crisis was not as intensive as the news media. The government was moderate in their communication concerning the financial crisis initially, the first official press conference was held on 22<sup>th</sup> September and subsequent press conferences were held as late as 13<sup>th</sup> October. As the financial crisis developed, the government stepped up their communication efforts focusing on the international characterization of the crisis and asserting their safe and responsible handling of the crisis in Sweden. The opposition, on the other hand, did not officially initiate any communication concerning the crisis during the first phase.

**Figure 1:** The number of news stories about the financial crisis in Sweden during the different phases of the financial crisis. The number and dates for government press conferences.



Note: N=3019

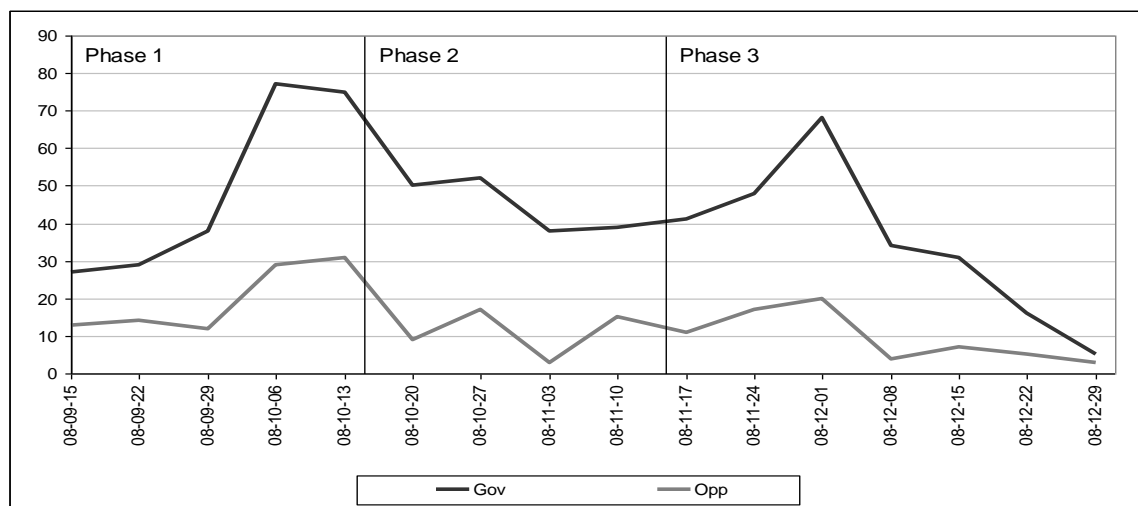
Even though major differences in source use and framing of stories could be expected in different media, the content analysis did not reveal significant differences. The small variances found was that: tabloid newspapers more frequently used citizens as sources and focused more on issues concerning private economy; quality newspapers included experts more often as sources as they focused on more in-depth news

stories in the supplement sections; and in broadcast as well as radio news programme journalists were more frequently used as sources. Overall, the attention to the crisis in the main news sections, the source use and the framing pattern indicates concordant coverage across different news outlets indicating that the national news media behaved as a relatively homogenous institution.

#### *News media's source use*

The first research question concerned the use of sources in news media during the financial crisis. Given the nature of the crisis as an unexpected event and the substantial increase in news coverage, we could expect a pattern of source use in news media challenging the indexing norm. The content analysis reveals that journalists did turn to various sources in the news coverage and included politicians in 35% of news stories, experts in 19%, citizens in 13% and journalists in 7%. Nevertheless, contrary to expectations, powerful politicians were the most frequently used source category in financial crisis coverage. Due to the dominant position of politicians as sources the following results will focus these political sources. Surprisingly government politicians dominated as sources in news coverage. The government significantly increased its presence as a source gaining its dominant position as the news coverage increased in the first phase of the crisis (see Figure 2). Furthermore, the news content analysis revealed that journalists did not include the political opposition in most news stories featuring government politicians.

**Figure 2:** The presence of sources from the government and the opposition in news coverage during the different phases of the financial crisis.



Note: N=840

At the individual level, the most frequent politicians in news media coverage were: first the Finance Minister, secondly the Prime Minister, and thirdly the Financial Market Minister, three political positions regarded as the most important in government. These findings furthermore indicate that journalists turned to the most powerful political actors in the newsgathering process during all phases of the crisis. The absence of the political opposition in crisis news opposes the expectations of the event-driven model challenging indexing norms. Even though the news gates opened wide as the crisis erupted, powerful Ministers were the most dominant voices in news media.

### *Framing the crisis*

With reference to the second research question Table 1 and 2 display the prominence of different frames presented by news media, the government and the opposition during the financial crisis. Due to the significant increase in news coverage and the event driven news dynamic, we could expect a challenge for both news media and political actors to make sense of the situation. As illustrated in Table 1, government framing of the financial crisis was initially scattered across different frames whereas the following phases display a clear focus on specific frames. Two major governmental frames emerged, the *bank crisis frame* in the second phase and the crisis of *economic growth frame* in the third phase emphasising the financial rather than the political dimension of the crisis. The remarkable increase in communication from one phase to the next demonstrates how the government stepped up their news management as the crisis developed.

A surprisingly uncommunicative political opposition is revealed in Table 1. Clearly, the opposition did not use the opportunity of the crisis to influence news framing in the initial phase. Contrary to all expectations, the political opposition did not present opposing or critical frames as it started communicating in the second phase. The findings illustrate a frame agreement with the government when the *bank crisis frame* emerged and dominated oppositional communication. However, as communication efforts increased in the third phase the opposition started criticising the government and emphasised the labour marked dimension of the financial crisis. Thus, counter frames failed to arise during the initial phases of the crisis as the event-driven model predicts. The opposition did not introduce counter-frames in their communication until the third phase when the crisis was actually waning from the media agenda. As we will see the absence of critical viewpoints also affects the evaluative framing in news media content.

**Table 1:** Government and opposition frames defining the financial crisis during the different phases

Frames	Phase 1		Phase 2		Phase 3		Total	
	Gov	Opp	Gov	Opp	Gov	Opp	Gov	Opp
Labour market	22	0	7	5	12	76	11	54
Finances of the state	0	0	0	0	4	0	2	0
Bank crisis	56	0	90	95	18	16	46	40
Business	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	0
Economic growth	22	0	3	0	61	4	38	3
Private economy	0	0	0	0	4	4	2	3
%	100	0	100	100	101	100	100	100
N (number of messages)	9	0	31	21	51	49	91	70

Note: Numbers of messages are displayed in percentage rather than (n) as it makes comparison easier.

As Table 2 illustrates, the news media coverage is distinguished by the presentation of a large variety of frames defining the financial crisis across all phases. The presentation of different frames indicates that news content included diverse problem definitions of the financial crisis and its effects. Even though the government and the opposition came to a consensus on how to frame the crisis and stepped up their communication efforts in the second phase, journalists continued to include different perspectives in media coverage. The dynamics created by the unexpected event, in line with expectations, would thus have encouraged journalists to include various viewpoints and sustain independent framing.

**Table 2:** News media frames defining the dominant character of the financial crisis during the different phases

Frames	Phase 1	Phase2	Phase 3	Total
Labour market	9	11	14	11
Finances of the state	4	3	2	3
Bank crisis	32	26	16	26
Business	22	40	45	34
Economic growth	5	6	6	5
Private economy	28	14	17	21
%	100	100	100	100
N (articles and newscasts)	551	469	395	1415

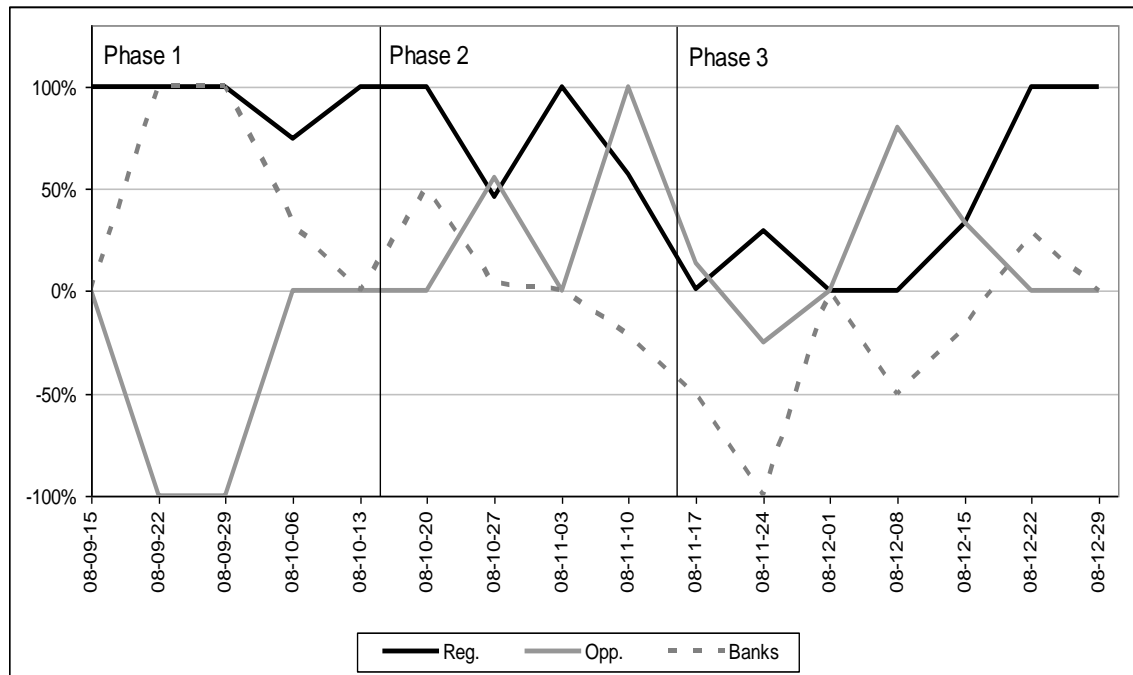
Note: Numbers of messages are displayed in percentage rather than (n) as it makes comparison easier.

Turning to the question of the relationship between the salience of political frames and media frames, the findings indicate that financial crisis frames presented by the government and the opposition were reflected in media coverage; however, these frames did not dominate. Thus, the unexpected event of the financial crisis opened up the possibility for different perspectives in news media framing of the crisis in addition to salient political frames.

#### *Evaluative framing during the financial crisis*

Considering the evaluative function of frames, the findings clearly illustrates that the government was positively evaluated and banks were negatively evaluated as their management of the crisis was depicted in political actors' messages. These findings are graphically displayed in Figure 3. The content analysis of political messages also illustrates how the government initially could communicate their preferred frames without challenge from a disagreeing political opposition. As the government increased their communication efforts in the initial phase two influential frames were promoted; firstly, *the government was monitoring the crisis and had taken the required precautions making sure state finances were standing strong against the economic turbulence in the world and secondly, the banks' irresponsible management of credits and economic bonuses was responsible for the financial crisis*. These frames, evaluating the government's management of the crisis as very positive and the banks' handling as very negative, were both salient across the following phases.

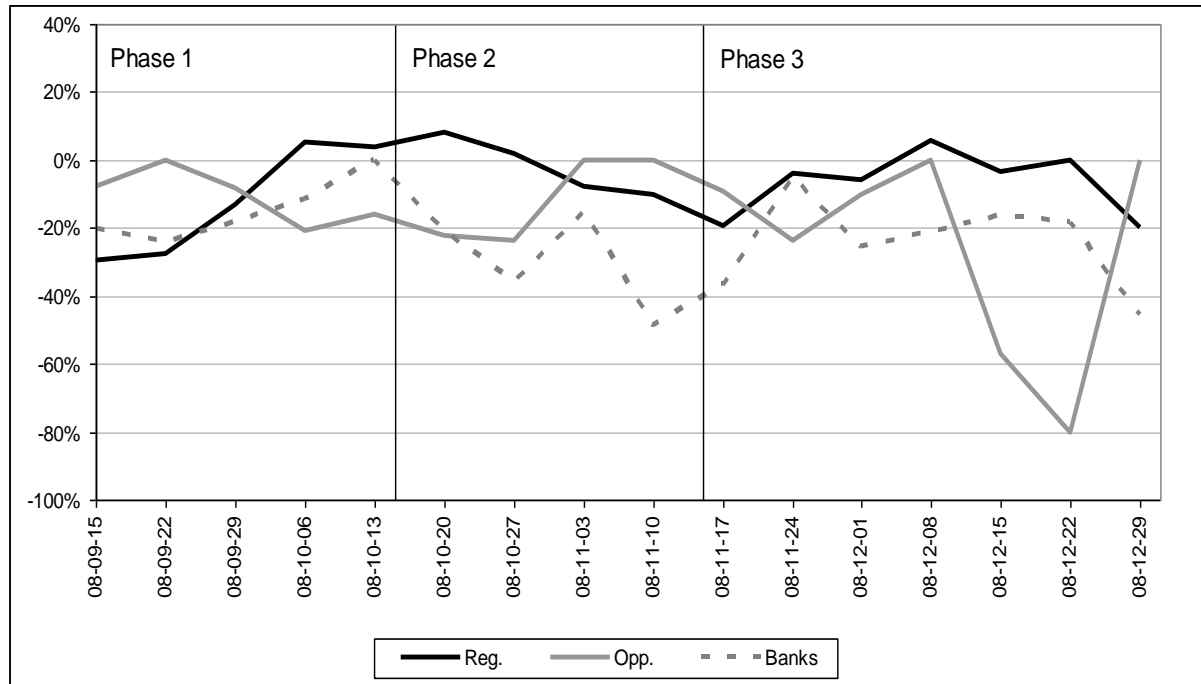
**Figure 3:** Evaluative framing of central actors in political messages during the different phases of the financial crisis.



Note: This figure is based on a balance measurement where every positive unit is calculated as +1 and every negative unit is calculated as -1, this was then recalculated into percentages. N=161

The content analysis of news stories also showed how the government's management of the crisis was more positively framed than the opposition and how the banks' management received a mostly negative framing in news content across all phases. As graphically illustrated in Figure 4, the initial negative framing of government turned into a less negative framing as government news management was established in the initial phase of the financial crisis. Media coverage thus came to be dominated by the more positive evaluation of the government and the more negative evaluation of the banks. The evaluative frames promoted by government portraying *government as responsible* and *banks as irresponsible* became a dominant media frame describing the different actors in the financial crisis coverage across all the phases.

**Figure 4:** Evaluative framing of central actors in news coverage during the different phases of the financial crisis.



Note: This figure is based on a balance measurement where every positive unit is calculated as +1 and every negative unit is calculated as -1, this was then recalculated into percentages. N=1711

These findings indicate that salient government frames influenced news media frames. Thus, the government was successful in influencing the evaluative framing in news media in contrast to the event-driven news model predicting various and divergent views in news coverage. Considering the dominance of governmental politicians as sources in news coverage these findings are not surprising as sources promote their own frames. Furthermore, the absence of an active political opposition left journalists with little critical evaluative frames to include in their news stories.

### Conclusion and discussion

Frame-building research has hitherto not fully examined different actors' ability to influence the frame-building process in news media (Zhou & Moy, 2007) and neither fully examined various dynamics that affects the frame-building process (R.G. Lawrence, 2010). This study departs from previous framing studies that examine journalistic routines and norms as source use in news coverage to integrate analyses of the



implementation of frames by both political actors and news media during the 2008 financial crisis. By utilizing this dramatic and unexpected event, the present study furthermore explores whether the context of event-driven news challenges political influence and journalistic routines in the frame-building process. However, the present study in contrast to expectations indicates that the government gained a dominant role in the frame-building process. By focusing on the Swedish case, which was characterized by a rapid growth of intense and negative news coverage (Färm, Jendel, & Nord, 2012) this study thus explores the interaction between political actors and news media in the frame-building process during an unexpected event.

The dramatic increase in media coverage in Sweden during the eruption of the financial crisis coincided with the fall of Lehman Brothers in September 2008. The crisis quickly became the major news story on the media agenda making it an important political issue as well. With no predetermined frames to interpret the situation the eruption of the financial crisis set off a scramble for sense making. The event-driven dynamic could thus challenge journalistic dependence on powerful political sources by opening up the news gates to various actors and viewpoints with subsequent influence on frame-building. The findings of this study display this initial uncertainty of sense making as the news included a wide range of frames and political actors were slow in responding to the intense and negative news coverage. However, as the crisis developed in the initial phase, the Swedish government stepped up their communication efforts and the Finance Minister gained the dominant role of the most frequently used source in news coverage. Even though the news gates opened up for other actors, the most powerful political actors quickly regained their position as dominant sources following the predictable pattern of indexing.

Clearly, journalists turned to the most powerful political actors in the newsgathering process scarcely including divergent or oppositional voices. Generally journalists include different sides of every story (Tuchman, 1972) but in this case political oppositional voices were initially absent and the opposition itself was reluctant to initiate their own communication efforts. Furthermore, the frame agreement between the opposition and the government in the second phase, defining the crisis as a bank crisis caused by the irresponsible management of credits and bonuses by banks, seriously constrained journalists access to different perspectives in the frame-building process. As the crisis continued and developed into a serious economic downturn the political opposition presented counter frames but the crisis was then waning from the media agenda. The dominance of governmental sources and lack of opposition in news coverage was thus evident in financial crisis coverage in Sweden. Turning to the evaluative framing, the findings illustrate how the government's perspectives of their own and other important actors' management of the crisis was reflected in news media. As dominant sources, governmental politicians and high-ranking ministers were able to influence framing of different actors' management of the crisis. Despite the unexpected character of the

crisis and expected event-driven dynamics encouraging journalistic autonomy, government potency in the relationship to journalists was not challenged neither limited.

Given the wide range of frames presented in the initial phase of the financial crisis by journalists we could expect the press to sustain alternative framing driven by the dynamic of the unexpected event. However, it is difficult to reconcile the notion of an independent press due to news framing of the crisis in the following phases. The interaction between government and press in this case resembles the relationship described as "characterized by moments of relative independence within a more general pattern of compliance with government news management" (Bennett et al, 2006: p. 469), a semi-independent relationship. Thus, a relationship that also plays out in the interaction between government and press in the frame-building process. In conclusion, the framing of the financial in Swedish news media did not present us with the dynamics of an unexpected event challenging journalistic dependence on powerful political actors. Communication efforts of the government ensured access to the news and potency to frame the crisis in order to explain what had happened, why it happened and how they handled the situation.

It is however important to note that one major limitation of this study is the lack of observations of the micro-processes contained in the government press relationship. But it is not within reach of this study to research the private contacts and relationships between politicians and journalists that undoubtedly are part of news making. These findings adds empirical evidence of political actors dominance in the interaction with news media when shaping news frames during an unexpected event but are unlikely to be generalizable as they come from a case study based on a single country during one specific event. Thus, more research is required in order to test if these findings are valid for other issues and events. Nevertheless, this study contributes to the on-going debate concerning the interaction between political actors and news media in the production of news frames.

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