FRAMING OF *SEWOL* FERRY TRAGEDY: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SOUTH KOREAN NEWSPAPERS

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Abstract

On April 16, 2014, a ferry named *Sewol* was on its way from Incheon to Jeju Island in South Korea, with 476 people on board. Most of the passengers were high school juniors on a school trip. After a sudden turn off at the southeastern coast, the ferry listed and subsequently drifted in the sea for nearly three hours. The ferry captain instructed the passengers to stay in their cabins until a rescue team reached while he and some other crew members abandoned the ship without informing others to escape. Consequently, only 172 people got off the *Sewol* ferry before it totally capsized and sank. In the months of rescue and search, the remains of 295 passengers and crew members were recovered from the shipwreck at the cost of the lives of two divers. Nine victims are still unaccounted for. This study aims to examine the framing of the *Sewol* ferry tragedy by three South Korean newspapers, which undertook different political orientations. The findings indicated that the newspapers reported the tragedy with different intensity and prominence, while employing different news sources. Responsibility was found to be the most salient frame in the coverage by the three newspapers. In addition, this study also found that the newspapers were mostly employing neutral valence in reporting the *Sewol* ferry tragedy.

Keywords: Sewol ferry tragedy, South Korean newspapers, framing, crisis, disaster

PEMBINGKAIAN TRAGEDI FERI *SEWOL:* ANALISIS PERBANDINGAN AKHBAR KOREA SELATAN

Abstrak

Pada 16 April 2014, sebuah feri bernama Sewol sedang dalam perjalanan dari Incheon ke Pulau Jeju di Korea Selatan, dengan 476 orang penumpang. Kebanyakan penumpang adalah junior sekolah tinggi dalam perjalanan ke sekolah. Walau bagaimanapun, setelah tiba di perairan tenggara, feri tersebut mengalami kerosakan dan hanyut di laut selama hampir tiga jam. Kapten feri mengarahkan penumpang untuk berada di kabin masing-masing sehingga pasukan penyelamat tiba, namun beliau dan beberapa orang anak kapal meninggalkan kapal dan melarikan diri tanpa sebarang makluman. Akibatnya, hanya 172 orang penumpang yang berjaya diselamatkan sebelum ianya benar-benar karam dan tenggelam. Dalam tempoh mencari dan menyelamat, hanya 295 mayat penumpang dan anak kapal telah ditemui. Sembilan mangsa masih belum dijumpai. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji kerangka

tragedi feri Sewol berdasarkan laporan daripada tiga surat khabar Korea Selatan yang mengamalkan orientasi politik yang berbeza. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa akhbar melaporkan kejadian itu dengan intensiti yang berbeza dan mengikut keutamaan masing-masing, dengan menggunakan sumber berita yang berbeza. Didapati juga bahawa Kebertanggungjawaban adalah bingkai yang paling penting dalam liputan oleh ketiga- tiga akhbar tersebut dan didapati bahawa ke semua surat khabar tersebut melaporkan tragedi feri Sewol secara neutral.

Kata kunci: *Tragedi feri Sewol , akhbar Korea Selatan, kerangka, krisis, bencana*

INTRODUCTION

On April 16, 2014, a ferry named *Sewol* was on its way to *Jeju* Island from Incheon with 476 people on board. Most of the passengers were high school juniors on a school trip. After a sudden turn off at the southeastern coast, the ferry listed and then drifted in the sea for nearly three hours. The captain of the *Sewol* ferry told the passengers to stay in their cabins until a rescue team reached as he and some other crew members abandoned the ship without informing anyone else to flee. Only 172 people got off the *Sewol* before it totally capsized and sank. The other 304 people went down with the ship. In the subsequent months of searching, the remains of 295 passengers and crew members were recovered from the shipwreck at the cost of the lives of two divers. Nine victims are still unaccounted for (*Korea Joongang Daily*, 16 April 2015).

Between the time of the first call for help from a student and that of the ferry rolling over and was subsequently almost completely submerged, two and a half hours had passed. Those crucial hours were lost to missteps and confusion as authorities up to the highest levels struggled to grasp the scale of what was happening (Nam & Gale, 2014). This tragedy had been a main topic of report and commentary in South Korea media outlets in 2014, and was considered as South Korea's worst peacetime disaster (Fackler, 2015). This case has not only deeply affected South Korean society, but also plainly revealed the structural problems in the country (Park, 2015). Since the April 16 sinking, President of South Korea Park Geun-hye's administration has faced criticism that the initial response was botched because too many agencies tried to seize control of the operation (Kwaak, 2014), and much of the anger from the public was directed at the government (Nam & Gale, 2014).

South Korean media were also reprimanded for failing to report the accurate facts of the incident. Right after the accident, South Korean mainstream media reported that all the 338 students were rescued. After several hours, however, it turned out that only 172 people including the captain and crew were rescued before the ferry sank. Hundreds of students were still in the sunken ferry. Since then, the number of survivors did not change despite, according to mainstream media coverage, the "unprecedented rescue operation of the South Korean government." The inaccurate and distorted report of the rescue operation was driven by the pro-government mainstream media (Punsu, 2014).

It has been proven that the news media, and, more specifically, the print media are major sources of information about current issues and powerful communicative methods (Cissel, 2012; Kim, 2008; Stamm, Johnson & Martin, 1997). Unsurprisingly, newspapers have long played a pivotal role in notifying the citizens about public affairs in South Korea (Kim, 1997; Kim, 2008), although the influential power of newspapers has been weakened due to the growth of internet and social media (Yun, 2012).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Ideologically biased reporting has been regarded to be a serious issue for journalists. It is not only considered to be poor journalism but also argued to be the primary reason why people do not trust the media (Eisinger, Veenstra, & Koehn, 2007). Therefore, comparing different newspapers which have different media ideologies is needed in evaluating the objectivity, neutrality and credibility of the media.

Although each media outlet makes its own version of the news governed by its editorial policies and takes different ideological positions (Doğu, 2015), none of the previous studies have analyzed the *Sewol* ferry disaster coverage by the different newspapers in South Korea. Nonetheless, there have been voluminous previous research on media framing between conservative and liberal newspapers due to a stark difference between their ideologies in South Korea: the nuclear crisis of South Korean peninsula (Choi, Kwak & Kim, 2014); AIDS (Jung, 2013); public health crisis (Logan, Park & Shin, 2004); and public

protests against the import of U.S. beef (Yoon, 2012).

The *Sewol* ferry accident engaged scholars' attention as the issue showed the current state of disaster reporting by the South Korean media. During the annual conference held by the Korea Speech and Communication Association in 2014, many experts pointed out the problems of the *Sewol* ferry accident reporting and proposed improvements (Park, 2015). Also, some research criticized the news reports of the *Sewol* ferry tragedy in terms of the underlying framework of disaster reporting and the principle of disaster reporting in journalism (Kang & Lee, 2015; Lee, 2015). However, little research applied the communication theories (Park, 2015). In addition, mass media research has previously focused mainly on media coverage of natural disasters (Houston, Pfefferbaum & Rosenholtz, 2012). Therefore, it will be interesting to investigate how the man-made disaster is framed.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study aimed to examine how three South Korean newspapers with different political orientations have covered the *Sewol* ferry disaster. The following research questions were examined:

RQ 1: What was the extent of coverage of the three newspapers in reporting the *Sewol* ferry disaster?
RQ 2: What sources of information did the newspapers cite in their coverage of the *Sewol* ferry disaster?
RQ 3: What was the news topic reported by the newspapers in their coverage of the *Sewol* ferry disaster?
RQ 4: What were the slants employed by the newspapers in reporting the *Sewol* ferry disaster?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Tuchman and Gitlin were two of the earliest scholars to introduce framing to media studies in 1978 and 1980 respectively (Zhou, 2008). They used the concept of framing as a tool to understand news as a social construction and social resource. Framing differs significantly from the repetition- and accessibility-based models in agenda setting and priming (Scheufele

& Tewksbury, 2007). According to Entman (1993), framing 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 treatment recommendation for the item described. (Entman, 1993, pp. 52)

Tankard (2008) enumerated several news features that commonly convey frames. They are headlines and kickers, subheads, photographs, photo captions, leads etc. Wong (2004) outlined four major dimensions of framing that could be studied: (1) presentation of news items (their size and placement); (2) news topic items (or what issues are included in the frame); (3) cognitive attributes (or the specific details of issues included); and (4) affective attributes (valence or tone of the article/picture). Manheim (1994) also explained that valence is the tone of a news story or comment regarding certain frames. It is believed to have the potential to generate behavioral effects. By indicating discourse valuations or carrying positive and/or negative elements, valenced news frames present the extent to which the coverage reflects favorably or unfavorably on an event/issue. In addition, Weaver (2007) mentioned that frames can be studied by means of systematic content analysis, interpretive textual analysis or discourse analysis. Tankard (2008) remarked that framing gives quantitative researchers a way to approach ideology, a subject mostly investigated by critical theorists to date. Framing may even give quantitative researchers a means to examine the hypothesis of media hegemony, one that has been difficult to validate empirically.

The literature to date has identified a handful of frames that occur commonly in the news. A study by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) identified five news frames (attribution of responsibility, conflict, human interest, economic consequences and morality) that were common in the Dutch national news media coverage of the Amsterdam meetings of European heads of state in 1997. It was found that the use of news frames depended on both the type of outlet and the type of topic. Most significant differences were not between media (television vs. the press) but between sensationalist vs. serious types of news outlets. Sober and serious newspapers and television news programs more often used the responsibility and conflict frames, whereas sensationalist outlets more often used the human interest frame. The five generic news frames constructed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) have been widely used

in the framing analysis of a range of issues, including racial-ethnic issues, integration, immigration, drugs or crime (Matthes & Kohring, 2008).

News is socially constructed and it reflects not just what happens but also the context within which it was gathered and processed (Spratt, Bullock & Baldasty, 2007). It was stressed that which events were covered (or not) and how they were covered were influenced by many considerations, including law, economics, political forces, culture, race, organizational structure of media and work routines of journalists (Gan, Teo & Detenber, 2005; Van Gorp, 2007). When it comes to ideologically sensitive issues, Song (2007) found that the mainstream news media serve as an institution of social control by imposing frames that marginalize causes or movements that challenge the values of the mainstream society. Alternative media, on the other hand, often serve as a communication outlet for movements and causes that are ignored or marginalized by the mainstream media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

South Korea News Media
The meaning of press freedom is that all processes of press activities should be conducted freely. However, it is impossible for the media to be free from governmental, political or economic control (LaMay, 2007). Press freedom is a vital ingredient to democratic societies (Steel, 2013).

Previous studies on press freedom in South Korea showed that the media have been under the control of the government (Sa, 2009a; Song, 2007). Although South Korea is a democratic country, the media face many constraints in providing crucial information about the political operations of the community since the South Korean media market is monopolized by a small number of media sources (Sa, 2009b). According to the South Korean Association of Newspapers (n.d), there are currently 47 newspapers in the country; 20 of them are published in Seoul, the capital city, while the rest of them are published in the provinces. As a non-English-speaking country, only 10 of these are published in English or provide an English version.

However, many newspapers are owned by large industrial upper classes and rely on major conglomerates for their advertising profits (Freedom House, 2013). The market is crushingly monopolized by three conservative newspapers, *Chosun Ilbo, JoongAng Ilbo and Dong-Ah Ilbo* (Sa, 2009b; Song, 2007). These mainstream newspapers have captured about 65 percent of the newspaper market share (Kwon, 2015). This form of oligopoly in the newspaper market has ruled general opinion and has been working closely with the political power by speaking for the people who are part of the mainstream and conservative politicians (Yoon, 2012), as well as by making news that reflects the demands and opinions of the political party in power (Sa, 2009b; Yun, 2012).

After the 2007 presidential election, the conservative group regained political power. The ruling Saenuri party, major conservative newspapers, and the president threatened the South Korean grassroots democracy and the press freedom that developed during the liberal rule (Sa, 2009b). The electronic media, especially, the internet and broadcast media, were oppressed during the Myung-Bak Lee government (2008-2013). The Lee government attempted to control internet activists by putting forth laws that prevented them from criticizing the government. This was demonstrated on 7th January 2009 with the arrest of Dae-Sung Park, the financial blogger known as 'Minerva', for posting negative comments about South Korea's ailing economic policy (he was released on the 20th April 2009) (Sa, 2009a).

Media Ideology and Biased Reporting

The media are influenced by diverse factors in perceiving issues. Journalists interpret and evaluate the same issues differently, due to not only their values and philosophy but also the culture and practice of the press organization to which they belong, external pressure like political and economic powers, and the macroscopic ideological values they have (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Media ideology has universally been regarded as a dominant factor via which journalists present viewpoints of political, economic and social issues, and also leads the public to interpret issues from a bias point of view (Mayer, 2005). Fundamentally, when news people produce news, ideology can be a clue that reflects their

awareness and practice either consciously or unconsciously (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). That is, the conservative media outlets are on the conservative party side, while the liberal media outlets take the liberal party's part in reporting policies (Lee & Bae, 2015). Thus, according to numerous political, economic and social factors, different beliefs, perceptions, values are reflected in news reports, which immediately give readers a partial view of the world (Fowler, 2013). So the world of news is not the real world, but a world skewed and judged (He & Zhou, 2015). News produced by the media already has connotations of ideological bias towards an objective. Therefore, newspaper editors and reporters increasingly confront the tension between the delivering of balanced, accurate reporting of daily events and the pressure to generate sellable products (Seale, 2003).

Ideology has a direct effect on bias news reports (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996) and journalistic decision-making processes (Reese, 2001). Gans (1979), who studied values that can be important for conservative and liberal reporters, regarded conservative media values as eight major clusters: ethnocentrism, altruistic democracy, responsible capitalism, small-town pastoralism, individualism, moderatism, social order and national leadership. At the same time, liberal media were deemed to be bias towards liberalistic values such as responsible capitalism, market liberalism, closing the gap between the rich and the poor, and the support of an open-door policy (Mayer, 2005).

In South Korea, numerous studies on news reports have concentrated on the different frames between conservative and liberal newspapers (Choi, Kwak & Kim, 2014; Jung, 2013; Lim, Lee & Lee, 2014; Logan, Park & Shin, 2004; Yang, 2008; Yoon, 2012). The conservative newspapers traditionally emphasize the issues within the pro-government and pro-business frameworks, whereas liberal newspapers use frames that are anti-government (Lim, Lee & Lee, 2014; Yang, 2008). According to Lee and Bae (2015), in common with other countries, the comparative studies on news frames between conservative and liberal newspapers in South Korea have mainly centered on either the political economy or social issues like the election, politics, enterprises, environment, development, and North Korea.

METHODOLODY

This study aims to compare three South Korean newspapers which have different political views, *Chosun IlboI* (conservative), *Hankyoreh* (liberal) and *Yonhap News* (neutral), with regard to their coverage of the *Sewol* ferry disaster. By standing in deep contrast to each other with regard to ideology (Choi, Kwak, & Kim, 2014), *Chosun Ilbo* and *Hankyoreh* are most influential in representing conservatism (Lee, Lancendorfer & Lee, 2005) and progressivism (Jung, 2013) respectively.

Background of the Selected Newspapers for the Study

As one of the major newspapers, *Chosun Ilbo,* founded on March 5th, 1920*,* is the most influential in South Korea. With the daily largest-circulation of over 2.2 million (Lee, Lancendorfer & Lee, 2005), it has submitted to annual government inspections since the Audit Bureau of Circulations was established in 1993. *Chosun*.com news website, which publishes web versions of the newspaper in English, Chinese, and Japanese, is ranked as the top South Korean news website by the Internet survey company *Rankey*.com (Mohd Fadil, 2014). Besides, *Chosun Ilbo* represents the interests and concerns of capitalists and their vested interests and it presents strong anti-communist and anti-North Korea stances (Yun, 2012). In part, on account of its overly conservative attitude toward issues, media experts declared that *Chosun Ilbo* is not seen as a highly credible news source by the South Korean public (Yoon, 2012).

On the other hand, the *Hankyoreh* was established in 1988 by ex-journalists who were ejected from the *Dong-ah Ilbo* and *Chosun Ilbo*, existing conservative newspapers, after widespread purges forced out dissident journalists (Yun, 2012). *Hankyoreh* was considered an alternative media source within the mainstream media structure in that it was independent from capital and political power (Kim, Ahn & Ham, 2015).

With the daily circulation of over 600,000 (Song, 2007), the *Hankyoreh* ranked fourth with respect to circulation revenue (Yun, 2012), establishing itself as a mainstream newspaper. It explicitly commits itself to journalistic freedom, democracy, peaceful coexistence and

national reconciliation between South and North Korea. Specifically, its editorial pages have tended to be more conciliatory about North Korean reunification than most Korean national news media (Logan, Park & Shin, 2004). However, *Hankyoreh* has now lost its original identity to survive in the intense competition of the media market (Kang, 2004). While it is more politically and culturally liberal than *Chosun Ilbo*, *Hankyoreh* is a newspaper that covers a wide range of national news, encouraging reportorial detachment, and makes a clear separation between news reporting and commentary (Logan, Park & Shin, 2004).

The *Yonhap News Agency* is a South Korean national wire service and has been dominating the news service market in the country. On November 19, 1998, this wire service launched its news site (<www.yna.co.kr>) and started providing English news service on January 3, 2000 (Lim, 2006). It covers politics, the economy, society, culture, entertainments, sports, science, and other topics, helping its readers to access news from across the global village. Currently, this news service produces more than 1,000 daily news stories in South Korean and more than fifty daily news stories in English (Lim, 2006). As an independent news agency, *Yonhap News* takes on an objective and neutral attitude without political colors (Kim & Ham, 2015).

In order to explore the relationship between media framing and its effects on the portrayal of various issues in the newspapers, content analysis was used as the research method for this study. Thirty eight articles from *Chosun Ilbo* (conservative), 24 articles from *Hankyoreh* (liberal), and 97 articles from *Yonhap News* (neutral) were chosen to be examined. *Chosun Ilbo* offers sections in Korean, Chinese, Japanese, and English; *Hankyoreh* in Korean, Japanese and English; and *Yonhap News* in Korean, Chinese, Japanese, English, French, Spanish, and Arabic. However, this study only focused on the English sections of each of the newspapers.

The sample of this study was drawn from April 16-25, 2015, as this time frame represented the first 10 days after the catastrophe took place in South Korea. The unit of analysis was articles of straight news, editorials and columns. The articles were collected through database search, which were pulled from the respective newspaper's online service by using 'Sewol' and 'Ferry' as the key words. The framing of the *Sewol* ferry disaster was

examined from four different dimensions: (1) extent of coverage, (2) news sources, (3) news topics and (4) slants of the articles.

The extent of coverage was examined from two angles: (1) number of articles and (2) type of articles. The categories for news sources were: (1) government officials and government agencies, (2) opposition party, (3) representatives from professional organizations, (4) civic groups, (5) common civilians, (6) survivors and bereaved families, and (7) others. If the same source was cited repeatedly in the same article, it was counted as one. If the same source was cited several times in different articles, it was counted whenever it was cited.

The five most commonly used news frames demonstrated by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) were adopted in this study: (1) human interest, (2) conflict, (3) morality, (4) economic, (5) responsibility, and (6) others. The following are the operational definitions for the news topics:

(1) Human interest - brings a human face or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue or problem; refers to an effort to personalize, dramatize or emotionalize the news in order to capture and retain audience interest.

(2) Conflict - emphasizes conflict and disagreement between individuals, groups, parties or institutions as a means of capturing audience interest; dichotomizes or labels the good and bad; news item refers to two sides instead of more than two sides of the issue/problem.

(3) Morality - puts the event, issue or problem in the context of religious tenets or moral prescriptions; emphasizes on collaboration and fellowship.

(4) Economic – reports an event, problem or issue in terms of the consequences it will have economically on an individual, group, institution, region or country.

(5) Responsibility – presents an issue or problem in such a way as to attribute responsibility for its cause or solution to either the government or to an individual or group.

(6) Others - frames that cannot be categorized will be coded as falling under the "Other" frame.

Slant of the articles refer to the attitude expressed toward the *Sewol* ferry disaster. The current study used the categories of supportive, critical and neutral for the analysis of

slants:

(1) Supportive – conveyed a favorable impression on the government actions on the *Sewol* ferry disaster or minimized the incompetence of the government. The coverage either supported or justified the president, the government officials and the government agencies that had responsibility in dealing with the *Sewol* ferry disaster.

(2) Critical – conveyed an unfavorable impression on the government actions on the *Sewol* ferry disaster or enlarged the incompetence of the government. The coverage deprecated the president, the government officials and the government agencies that had responsibility in dealing with the *Sewol* ferry disaster.

(3) Neutral – neither portrayed the government actions on the *Sewol* ferry disaster favorably nor unfavorably. It also neither justified nor condemned the president and the government actions on the *Sewol* ferry disaster.

FINDINGS

The following are some basic information regarding the frequency and percentage of the variables suggesting the importance of conceptual differentiation among the three newspapers.

Extent of Coverage

Yonhap News published the most number of articles on the *Sewol* ferry disaster (97 articles), followed by *Chosun Ilbo* (38 articles), and *Hankyoreh* (24 articles). In order to investigate the characteristics of the *Sewol* ferry disaster reporting, the article types were analyzed. As shown in Table 1, the majority of the articles from the three newspapers were straight news which convey objective facts. *Chosun Ilbo* carried the highest number of straight news (86.9%), followed by *Yonhap News* (85.6%), and *Hankyoreh* (58.3%). The interesting finding was that the three newspapers either devoted very little or no space for column commentary on the issue. Concretely, only *Chosun Ilbo* published a column article, which made up 2.6%. *Chosun Ilbo* and *Yonhap News* devoted 10.5% and 14.4% of their coverage respectively to editorials, while *Hankyoreh* provided 41.7% to the same. The really interesting outcome was that there were no own editorials published in *Yonhap News*, but instead the editorials were all from the other newspapers such as *Korea Times, Korea Herald*, and *Korea Joongang Ilbo*. As it has been self-designated as a neutral newspaper, it seemed that it wants to maintain its non-

political stance.

Table 1: Extent of coverage

	Chosun (n = 38) %	Hankyoreh (n = 24) %	Yonhap (n = 97) %
Straight news	86.9	58.3	85.6
Editorial	10.5	41.7	14.4
Column	2.6	0	0

It can thus be observed that there existed a difference in the articles types among the three newspapers. In the reporting of the *Sewol* ferry disaster, *Chosun Ilbo* and *Yonhap News* placed more weight on the delivery of objective information, while *Hankyoreh* exposed its political views actively through the editorials.

News Sources

The results in Table 2 demonstrated that *Chosun Ilbo* (48.9%) depended heavily on government officials and agencies as its news source. Representatives from professional organizations and others were also attributed as news sources, where each made up 17% respectively, followed by survivors and bereaved families (10.7%), common civilians (4.3%), and civic groups (2.1%).

Table 2: News Sources

	Chosun (n = 38) %	Hankyoreh (n = 24) %	Yonhap (n = 97) %
Government officials and agencies	48.9	53.0	54.7
Opposition party	0	0	2.3
Professional organizations	17	9.4	13.3
Civic groups	2.1	0	1.5
Common civilians	4.3	6.3	4.7
Survivors and bereaved families	10.7	18.8	10.2
Others	17	12.5	13.3

Similarly, *Hankyoreh* also relied most heavily on government officials and agencies (53.0%) as its source, followed by survivors and bereaved families (18.8%), others (12.5%), representatives from professional organizations (9.4%), and common civilians (6.3%).

The most important news source for *Yonhap News* was government officials and agencies (54.7%) likewise, followed by representatives from professional organizations (13.3%), others (13.3%), survivors and bereaved families (10.2%), common civilians (4.7%), opposition party (2.3%), and civic groups (1.5%).

Although all three newspapers relied heavily on governmental sources in common, the tangible difference among the three newspapers was the usage of the representatives from professional organizations as well as the survivors and bereaved families as news sources. In detail, *Chosun Ilbo* (17%) and *Yonhap News* (13.3%) utilized experts as their news sources more than *Hankyoreh* (9.4%), while *Hankyoreh* (18.8%) made greater use of the survivors and bereaved families as its news sources than *Chosun Ilbo* (10.7%) and *Yonhap News* (10.2%).

News Topics

Chosun Ilbo

As shown in Table 3, the responsibility frame was the most frequently used frame in *Chosun Ilbo* (36.8%). The newspaper tended to assign specific blame to the individual or government. In *Chosun Ilbo*, responsibility for causing or solving the issue was even more heavily attributed to individuals or the company to which the individuals belong (80%) than the government (20%). It was reported that the captain and crew told the passengers to remain where they were, while they escaped and set foot on dry land even before the *Sewol* had completely gone under (*The Chosun Ilbo*, 18 April 2014a). Investigations found that the ferry's third mate, Park, who had begun working for the ferry company only just four months earlier, was guiding the *Sewol* through the area reputed to have some of the fastest currents in South Korea (*The Chosun Ilbo*, 18 April 2014b). It was proven that none of the *Sewol* ferry crew had any knowledge of the ship's manual and underwent no safety training (*The Chosun*

Ilbo, 23 April 2014). Besides, the ferry operator, *Chonghaejin*, bought the ferry second-hand, built in 1994, from a Japanese shipping company. As more decks were added to the ferry, its center of gravity rose and weakened its capacity to regain stability (*The Chosun Ilbo*, 21 April 2014a).

The stories suggested that some level of the government is responsible for the problem. It emerged that it took the South Korea Coast Guard 12 long minutes to answer a distress call from the sinking ferry, and that the authorities then wasted time debating on who should be making the decision to evacuate the ferry (*The Chosun Ilbo*, 21 April 2014ba). According to the transcripts, the ferry put the distress call to the emergency services in Jeju, its destination, instead of the one in Jindo, which was closer to the scene of the disaster (*The Chosun Ilbo*, 24 April 2014).

Table 3: News Topics

	Chosun (n = 38) %	*Hankyoreh* (n = 24) %	*Yonhap* (n =97) %
Human interest	34.2	29.2	35.1
Conflict	5.3	0	3.1
Morality	7.9	4.2	7.2
Economic	15.8	0	6.2
Responsibility	36.8	66.6	38.1
Others	0	0	10.3

The second most salient frame found in *Chosun Ilbo* was the human interest frame (34.2%). The newspaper's articles contained photographs such as the faces of the students who survived, the families of students who were on a capsized ferry crying, praying and waiting for their children, the families of missing passengers looking at the list of descriptions of newly found bodies from the sunken ferry, and the civilians who hold a candlelight vigil for the victims of the *Sewol* ferry disaster. Articles also delved into the private personal lives of the heroes who saved many passengers when the ferry sank. It was reported that a temporary service crew member who died in the disaster, Jiyong Park, stayed inside until the end to help passengers escape safely while the captain and many other crewmembers rushed to escape the sinking vessel (*The Chosun Ilbo*, 23 April 2014b). Besides, the newspaper emphasized how survivors and the people who are related to them are

affected by the issue. It was said that the survivors and friends of the victims suffered post-traumatic stress disorder, and that the survivors would need to go through six months to a year of psychiatric treatment (*The Chosun Ilbo*, 17 April 2014a).

The third concern of *Chosun Ilbo* was about the economic frame (15.8%). The newspaper reported that celebrities (e.g. British singing prodigy Connie Talbot, a figure skater Yu-na Kim, a baseball player Hyun-jin Ryu) from around the world were making donations to help the survivors, bereaved relatives as well as the ongoing search effort after the ferry capsized. It was also reported that there was a decrease in public spending based on the declining volume of credit card transactions. Some of the biggest organizations such as Samsung and LG advised their employees to refrain from excessive drinking or attending external meetings (*The Chosun Ilbo*, 23 April 2014c).

Additionally, 7.9% of the coverage portrayed the morality frame in the *Chosun Ilbo*. It reported that terrible tragedies kept happening because the South Korean society has been focusing only on progress, while basic safety rules were being easily ignored (*The Chosun Ilbo*, 21 April 2014a). This could be seen from the behavior of the captain and the crew who escaped ahead of the hundreds of passengers. Besides, although there were 46 lifeboats that could each hold between 10 and 15 people, only one of them functioned (*The Chosun Ilbo*, 18 April 2014c).

Chosun Ilbo employed only 5.3% of its coverage on the conflict frame. It published that there were different opinions on the cause of the ferry disaster. The rescue forces said it was possible that the captain shifted course to make up for lost time due to the delayed departure and ended up hitting a rock. Also, a spokesperson for the ferry operator, Choughaejin, told reporters that the *Sewol* did not stray "too far" off its safe course (*The Chosun Ilbo*, 17 April 2014b).

Hankyoreh

Hankyoreh also paid special attention to the responsibility frame (66.6%). Inconsistent with *Chosun Ilbo*, *HanKyoreh* tended more towards holding the government and the governmental

agencies (65.6%) accountable for the ferry disaster than towards individuals or the ferry company (34.4%). It was published that the government did not take the crisis seriously in the early stages and thus failed to move quickly to begin rescue operations. The government's pathetic inability to respond to accidents was also reflected in its failure to even grasp the basic situation twelve hours after receiving word of the accident (*The Hankyoreh*, 18 April 2014a). The newspaper criticized that more lives could be saved if the first response had been stronger because most of the victims were found wearing life vests in the vicinity of the capsized vessel. The report was harshly critical of the government and the government agencies related to the issue. Although the President Park administration had amended the relevant laws to improve the national disaster response system, which stated that in the event of a national disaster, the Ministry of Security and Public Administration was to immediately set up a Central Disaster and Safety Countermeasures Headquarters (CDSCH) to serve as a pan-governmental control tower, that control tower function was entirely missing from the government's response after the sinking. The number of victims was frequently inaccurate, feeding into the growing popular mistrust and anger. It also mentioned that the foreign media provided detailed coverage of the ferry sinking and the foreign coverage showed the whole world just how backward South Korea's disaster response system and crisis management capacity were (*The Hankyoreh*, 21 April 2014).

With respect to the episodic news frame, apart from the criticism of the irresponsible captain and the ferry crew members (*The Hankyoreh*, 19 April 2014a), it was reported that the company also hold responsibility for the ferry sinking disaster because of the illegal expansions made to the ferry, the loading of too much freight as well as the leaving of inexperienced people at the helm (*The Hankyoreh*, 23 April 2014),

Much attention was also given by *Hankyoreh* to the human interest frame (29.2%). The director of the hospital where the students were treated was quoted to have said that the victims saved by their teachers were avoiding contact with strangers due to the intense trauma that they suffered but the word "teacher" is enough to make them prick their ears with the desire to hear news (*The Hankyoreh*, 18 April 2014b). Expressions that generate feelings of outrage, empathy-caring and sympathy were commonly used in the articles, for example,

"around 500 students and residents gathered … for a candlelight vigil…, as heavy rains poured down", "Even the heavens are crying", "the family members of the missing passengers had dry mouths, and opening them took some effort…many of them burst into tears" (*The Hankyoreh*, 19 April 2014b).

In terms of how people were influenced by the issue, there was a report on the suicide of the rescued vice-principal of the high school from which the students were on the *Sewol* ferry because of the feeling of guilt (*The Hankyoreh*, 19 April 2014c).It was also reported that that survivors of the accident were in dire need of treatment not only for post-traumatic stress disorder but also for survivor syndrome (*The Hankyoreh*, 21 April 2014b).

In covering the morality frame (4.2%), *Hankyoreh* provided not only the examples of people who assisted the evacuation of the others although they had the opportunity to escape, but also accented that South Korea needed to build a strong community and system to respond effectively to crises, so as to not just depend on these small heroes (*The Hankyoreh*, 19 April 2014d).

Yonhap News

Yonhap News also gave more coverage on the topic of responsibility (38.1%) compared to the rest of the frames. In comparison to the other two newspapers which focused on identifying and casting blame on the parties responsible for the ferry sinking, it paid attention to not only the inquest into the disaster but also the post-disaster operations and issues such as the search operations for bodies, the number of the bodies recovered and the issue of reprimand or compensation (e.g. for the captain, crew members, the owner family of the operator as well as the scaremongers). For example, it reported statistical information on the divers, vessels and helicopters harnessed for the rescue operations (*Yonhap News*, 18 April 2014a). Thus, *Yonhap News* tended to use more of the thematic news frame (91.9%) than the episodic news frame (8.1%) by presenting the progress and development of the handling the issue (e.g. compensation for the ferry victims, opening altars across the nation) at the governmental level. For instance, it was reported that the nation extended utmost support to foreigners planning to enter the country for the remains of their loved ones killed via ferry sinking (*Yonhap News*, 22 April 2014a).

Much attention was also given by *Yonhap News* towards the human interest angle (35.1%). It reported that celebrities like star athletes (e.g. Shin-soo Choo and Hyun-jinRyu) as well as foreign governments (e.g. the U.S., France, Britain, Canada, Russia, North Korea and China) expressed their condolences. For example, it was reported that Obama and his wife sent their deepest and heartfelt condolences to the families of the victims of the tragic ferry sinking accident (*Yonhap News*, 18 April 2014a). It also provided the story of the person who spread a vicious rumor that the police told the private divers who came to help the rescue operations to just sit around and kill time and some of private divers had gone underwater and found some of the passengers trapped and alive inside the submerged ferry (*Yonhap News*, 18 April 2014b). It reported that not only would the survivors needed treatment after the traumatic experience but that the divers searching the sunken ferry for missing passengers also suffered from decompression sickness after long hours in the cold, dark waters (*Yonhap News*, 23 April 2014).

Yonhap News devoted 10.3% of its coverage on the others frame. In its reports of the visit of the U.S president Obama, although it was mentioned that he grieved over the ferry sinking, the major point in the articles were that North Korea was fully ready to conduct a fourth nuclear test (*Yonhap News*, 24 April 2014a). North Korea lambasted the South's ruling party lawmaker for his attempt to capitalize on the ferry sinking to create anti-Pyongyang (the capital city of North Korea) sentiments (*Yonhap News*, 22 April 2014b).

In covering the morality frame (7.2%), *Yonhap News* emphasized the issue of safety by commenting that students must be taught how to respond in an emergency. It also recommended that it was necessary to enforce feasible safety rules, and those who violate them should be strictly held accountable in the event of calamities (*Yonhap News*, 24 April 2014b).

Yonhap News was also concerned with the economic effect frame (6.2%). It published articles not only on the donations for the ferry disaster (*Yonhap News*, 22 April 2014c) but also on the fall in domestic consumption such as the decreased number of visitors to golf

ranges (*Yonhap News*, 23 April 2014b).

Only 3.1% of *Yonhap News'* coverage focused on the conflict frame. It reported that lawmakers of the main opposition party disagreed with President Park's government in the handling of the issue. In particular, they criticized that the government was not there where and when the people needed its help badly in the protection of their lives and properties, and that the government adopted avoidance strategies for the ferry accident (*Yonhap News*, 24 April 2014b).

Slants

In Table 4, some significant results were seen in terms of the slants used among the three newspapers in reporting the *Sewol* ferry disaster. The table illustrated that the three newspapers either devoted very little or no space for supportive coverage on the issue. Specifically, only *Yonhap News* (9.3%) and *Chosun Ilbo* (5.3%) reported on the incident in a supportive manner, while *Hankyoreh* had none such slants. The supportive coverage delivered a favorable impression on the government actions on the *Sewol* ferry disaster or minimized the incompetence of the government agencies. The coverage either supported or justified the president, the government officials and the government agencies that had responsibility in dealing with the *Sewol* ferry disaster. For instance, it was reported in *Yonhap News* that the government designated two areas directly linked to the deadly sinking of the ferry *Sewol* as special disaster zones to speed up state financial and other support for the families of the victims (*Yonhap News*, 20 April 2014).

Table 4: Slants

	Chosun (n = 38) %	*Hankyoreh* (n = 24) %	*Yonhap* (n = 97) %
Supportive	5.3	0	9.3
Critical	18.4	58.3	27.8
Neutral	73.3	41.7	62.9

There was a great gap in the distribution of critical slants among the three newspapers. The *Sewol* ferry disaster received the most critical coverage from *Hankyoreh* (58.3%) as compared to *Yonhap News* (27.8%) and *Chosun Ilbo* (18.4%). By applying the critical tone,

the coverage conveyed an unfavorable impression on the government actions on the *Sewol* ferry disaster or enlarged the incompetence of the government. The coverage deprecated the president, the government officials and the government agencies that had responsibility in dealing with the *Sewol* ferry disaster. In an article from *Hankyoreh*, it was reported that the government was criticized for not dispatching rescue boats and helicopters until after the ship had capsized. Also, the lax response from the headquarters responsible for handling accidents despite clear evidence of the severity of the sinking situation was proven through transcripts of the accident report released by the South Korean Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries (*The Hankyoreh*, 18 April 2014c).

Overall, the coverage of the *Sewol* ferry disaster among the three newspapers was neutral in tone. The most neutral slant came from *Chosun Ilbo* (73.3%), followed by *Yonhap News* (62.9%), and *Hankyoreh* (41.7 %). By reporting in a neutral manner, the coverage neither portrayed the government actions on the *Sewol* ferry disaster favorably nor unfavorably. It also neither justified nor condemned the president and the government actions on the *Sewol* ferry disaster.

Of particular interest was that *Yonhap News* did not editorialize on this issue, while it printed editorials written by the other newspapers such as *Korea Herald, Korea Time,* and *Joong-ang Ilbo*. The majority of these articles (71.4%) were critical of the government actions and its incapability on the handling of the *Sewol* ferry tragedy, while the rest of the articles had a neutral tone, that is, none of them adopted the supportive slant.

DISCUSSION

In recognizing issues, the public is strongly influenced by the news media, more specifically what news organizations decide to cover, how much prominence and space are allocated and how the issue is viewed (McCombs, 2005). In this paper, the amount of coverage devoted to the *Sewol* ferry catastrophe was examined to understand the extent to which the issue was mentioned by the three newspapers. The distinction in the number of articles from *Chosun Ilbo* (38)*, Hankyoreh* (24)*,* and *Yonhap News* (97) indicated that they carried unequal weight of attention to the *Sewol* ferry disaster. The findings showed that *Yonhap News* was much

more concentrated on the issue than the other two newspapers. As a South Korean national wire service, *Yonhap News* has been dominating the news service market in South Korea because domestic news media rely on the three types of news information provided *Yonhap News* – national news, economic information and photographs/graphic information (Lim, 2006). Therefore, as a provider of information, there is no doubt that *Yonhap News* paid the most attention to the *Sewol* ferry accident in comparison to the other two newspapers.

The types of articles are also an element of influence for readers to evaluate an issue (McCombs, 2005). Since all three newspapers predominately consisted of straight news articles, it means that they took a factual approach to report what happened, who was involved as well as where, when, and why it happened. Thomson, White and Kitley (2008) classified hard news as reports of accidents, disasters, protests, crimes, court proceedings, warfare and similar events. Rui and Jiang (2001) suggested that hard news tend to be "straight news report" or "objective news report", the communicative purpose of which is to provide readers with bare facts almost without the reporter's opinion expressed. In other words, when a disaster occurs, the role of the mass media is understood to include communicating whatever warning is available (if any), providing a description of what had occurred, keeping the public informed post event, and even contributing to individual and community recovery and to community resilience (Norris, Stevens, Pfefferbaum, Wyche & Pfefferbaum, 2008; Scanlon, 2011). Therefore, it is only natural that the majority of the articles on the *Sewol* ferry disaster from the three newspapers were straight news.

Interestingly, although *Hankyoreh* had a relatively fewer amount of articles about the *Sewol* ferry disaster, it adopted gave much more coverage to editorials (41.7%) in complete contrast to the other two newspapers. It means that *Hankyoreh* actively reveals its own views by interpreting and assessing the issues and opinions it disseminates, and performs as a political actor. Thus, it takes on an active role in the communication process by offering its audiences more opportunities to encounter diverse opinions and remarks. However, it might be considered as a manipulative and manipulated newspaper influencing public attitudes and policy decisions without democratic legitimation (Eilders, 1997).

Yoon (2012) said that journalists are assisted by news sources in reporting a story, thus the news sources cited have a significant influence on shaping news frames. Fishman (1980) suggested that news is determined by what the news sources say. Sigal (1986) even argued that news is the thing a person says something takes place, instead of what happens. The current paper noticed that there was a notable coherence across the three newspapers in that all of three used government officials and the governmental agencies as the major news source. This is probably because of their accessibility to the news media because it is unlikely that the journalists themselves have experienced the event. The constraints that journalists have such as deadlines allow reporters to rely on government officials and agencies that are readily available for facts, opinions, and interpretations (Logan, Park & Shin, 2004).

Unsurprisingly, this showed that governmental sources play a significant role in emergency situations since they often provide authoritative information about safety measures, rescue operation, and support for the victims and bereaved families. Study after study determined that the three newspapers permitted government officials in the nation to perform as opinion leaders in handling the *Sewol* ferry disaster (Houston, Pfefferbaum & Rosenholtz, 2012; Li, Lindsay & Mogensen, 2002; Logan, Park & Shin, 2004; Yoon, 2012), supporting the academic literatures pointing out that the South Korean media have been under government control (Sa, 2009b; Song, 2007).

Disaster reporting like the *Sewol* ferry sinking might have no choice but to rely heavily on the formal announcements (e.g. official results of the number of the survivors and the dead) from the government because the government acted as a control tower for the disaster (Kim, Ahn & Ham, 2015). Although it was pointed out that the *Sewol* ferry disaster took place because of the bungled handling by the authorities and the corruption implicating the ferry operator and retired officials, the government and government officials were nevertheless used as the main source in inquiring into the cause and responsibility of the issue. This shows that there was less diversity in terms of the news sources and there was also a lack of viewpoint plurality during the process of the disaster's truth ascertainment, in line with Sa (2009b). However, the fact that about 52.2% (the average of the governmental sources used in the three newspapers) of the stories utilized government officials and its

agencies also suggested that during a crisis the capacity of government officials as sources is limited in certain aspects. The media need to rely on a variety of sources to provide accurate and useful information.

In terms of the second major source used for the reporting of the *Sewol* ferry disaster, both *Chosun Ilbo* and *Yonhap News* quoted representatives from professional organizations and others (e.g. celebrities, foreign government and foreign media). This result was similar to findings of Logan, Park and Shin (2004) which suggested a tendency to overemphasize elite sources in South Korean newspapers. *Hankyoreh* on the other hand quoted survivors and bereaved families to describe the issue. Consequently, the relevant people's description of the whole process of the ferry sinking was more concrete and thus more vivid, whereas statements from experts using indirect speech were rather vague.

The study found that storylines differed as the crisis unfolded; governmental sources played a major role; stories were framed differently upon the issues covered; some frames were more common than others; and that different slants were used among the three newspapers in presenting the issues. In terms of the news topics, media reports of the *Sewol* ferry accident published from the three newspapers provided two main frames in its content: responsibility and human interest, in line with similar prior research which showed that the media was most likely to use the responsibility and human interest frames if the crisis was preventable and was a man-made issue (An & Gower, 2009). Although the three news organizations have been known to have different political orientations, there was no significant difference in their use of the two frames as the most dominant frames.

Most of the news coverage on the *Sewol* ferry disaster included content on what caused the disaster, what influenced responses to the disaster and what the disaster meant for the people and communities experiencing the disaster. According to Graber (2009), during the first stage of a crisis, the media are the primary information source not only for the general public, but also for public officials involved in the crisis. Thus, the media's key roles are to describe what has happened and help coordinate the relief work. Their top priority is to get accurate information, which relieves uncertainty and calms the people.

When reporting on a crisis, the news media have a tendency to assign specific blame to the individual or government (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). However, in this study, the three newspapers significantly differed in how the responsibility frame was applied. *Chosun Ilbo* and *Hankyoreh* focused more on who were responsible for the cause of the disaster, while *Yonhap News* tended to emphasize on the solutions relating to the issue (e.g. compensation, search operation, and manhunt). *Chosun Ilbo* mostly represented compliance with the government's stance by using the thematic news frame. *Chosun Ilbo* had a tendency to say that the deadly ferry sinking occurred because of the selfishness of the captain and the crew, as well as the carelessness of the ferry operator, consistent with An and Gower (2009) who discovered that preventable crises news stories were more likely to focus on the individual level of responsibility.

One the other hand, *Hankyoreh* approached the topic on responsibility from a different direction by entirely emphasizing the ineffective ways the government and the governmental agencies used during the disaster, in particular, their bungled response and slow search process. The result was in conjunction with Yoon (2012), who suggested that *Chosun Ilbo* has a pro-government stance, while *Hankyoreh* buttresses the public's disappointment with the government's inability to deal with a crisis, and Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) who found that responsibility was attributed to the government in their research of the Dutch national news media.

Disasters have often been argued to have significant political implications, particularly after the initial danger of the event has passed (Houston, Pfefferbaum & Rosenholtz, 2012). The three newspapers' political orientations seemed to be reflected in the responsibility frame. It was found that calls for the government to rectify the issues related to the overlooking of safety and to enhance safety regulations have met with political resistance in *Hankyoreh*. In addition, *Chosun Ilbo* tended to protect the government by assigning the responsibility of the occurrence of the issue towards individuals and the company related to the disaster. As a neutral newspaper, *Yonhap News* was neither blaming nor protecting the government.

Cho and Gower (2006) added that in recent years news coverage is more likely to use hysterical journalism, meaning over-hypes or over-dramatized coverage written in an extreme, frightened, angry, or exciting style, or reporting that expresses the emotions or feelings of reporters, when a crisis occurs. Such hysterical journalism stimulates the psychological pulse and affects the audience's perception more negatively towards the parties concerned with the event. In other words, coverage using the human interest frame might have negatively affected the public's evaluation of the Park administration.

Slant and variable tones in news coverage have been attributed to a host of factors in modern politics and journalism (Dunaway, 2013). The disparity of the slants used among the three newspapers also portrayed the newspapers' stances toward the government. Although *Chosun Ilbo* mostly reported the issue in neutral ways (73.3%), it downsized the inability of the government response to the *Sewol* ferry disaster by overemphasizing the responsibility of individuals. Thus, *Chosun Ilbo* played the role of a shield for the government, and *Hankyoreh* acted more like a monitor. In terms of *Yonhap News*, it was apparently neutral about the issue. But, interestingly, in consideration of the editorials posted having mostly a critical tone, *Yonhap News* is a hidden observer because editorials is seen as the method for news organizations to reveal their views.

CONCLUSION

The newspapers have a significant role in communication and informing public opinion, and thus, have a diverse and complex impact on society. In interpreting news, journalists can affect the coverage inclination by the prominence they allocate to the news, the way the issue is portrayed, the sources they cite and the slants they use. Accordingly, the current research studied what pictures newspapers have created for their readers' understanding of the *Sewol* ferry disaster. The finding indicated although they portrayed the same issue, there were considerable differences in the coverage on the situation among *Chosun Ilbo, Hankyoreh,* and *Yonhap News*, demonstrating bias, sensationalism, and highly polarized debates since they approached the same issue from different standpoints.

Journalists' reactions and opinions on the subject of media bias vary. Thus, D'Alessio and Allen (2000) suggested that with an unbalanced news coverage of an event, that is, when members working in the news media insert their own opinions into the text of coverage of an issue and when editors choose certain news stories from a pool of potential news stories in a bias manner, media bias occurs (as cited in Eisinger, Veenstra, & Koehn, 2007). In this respect, media frames can be regarded as outputs of strong ideological processes.

There are several limitations in this study. First, the sample consisted news items from only three newspapers, which resulted in a low generalization of the results to the overall population of South Korean newspapers. Second, the total sample was only 159 articles, so an increase in the number of articles might yield different results. In addition, this study only focused on English-language articles, which would definitely differ from the original South Korean articles in terms of the variables (e.g. the number of articles, the type of news materials, frames, and tone). Besides, analyzing other media platforms such as TV and radio might reveal different results from those discovered in the newspapers.

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