

# Visual Framing on the “*Debating Europe*” Platform: a case study on the “economic consequences” and “attribution of responsibility” generic frames

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## Abstract

*This article aims to provide an overview on the visual content published on the “Debating Europe” Platform, a qualitative approach of the visual communication model of the platform, as well as a series of methodological observations resulting from the analysis of two corpora of images. After a brief presentation of the ‘Debating Europe’ platform, the visual analysis framework is considered, questioning a two-fold approach. Accordingly, a case study is conducted, first to identify the visual representation of two generic frames, “attribution of responsibility” and “economic consequences”, and second, whether these two frames can be inferred from the visual content published on the “Debating Europe” platform.*

## Keywords

*Virtual public sphere, visual communication, visual representation, visual framing.*

## Résumé

*Cet article se propose de fournir un aperçu sur le contenu visuel publié sur la plate-forme « Debating Europe », une approche qualitative du modèle de communication visuelle de la plate-forme, ainsi qu’une série d’observations méthodologiques résultant de l’analyse de deux corpus. Après une brève présentation de la plate-forme « Debating Europe », le cadre théorique de l’analyse visuelle est considéré, interrogeant une approche à deux volets. Ensuite, une étude de cas est menée, d’abord afin d’identifier la représentation visuelle de deux cadres génériques, « attribution de la responsabilité » et « conséquences économiques », et, deuxièmement, voir si ces deux cadres peuvent être déduites à partir du contenu visuel publié sur la plate-forme « Debating Europe ».*

## Mots clé

*Sphère publique virtuelle, communication visuelle, représentation visuelle, cadrage visuel.*

## Introduction

Visual content has long been considered as a key ingredient in commercial and public communication; still, with the advent of online media system and Internet networks, its value as a top-level tool has been increasingly emphasized, whether it comes to measure social media engagement, readership and even sales. Phrases like “visual content is king”, or “the visual web” are powerful key-words in professional blogs, articles, and white papers promoting visual content as a requirement, not an option (Aurricchio & Zdanowicz, 2014), (Tech, 2016) (Georgieva, 2012). On the other hand, research focusing on the impact of visual content can be identified in several domains: the educational field, with studies on the facilitative effect of pictures on learning and reading, going back to research conducted primarily during the 1970s and 1980s (Ong, 2011) (Carney & Levin, 2002), as well as empirical work developed on emergent literacies during the 1980s by Margaret Meek Spencer (Buckingham, 2006). Transitioning from linguistics, the rich exploration opened by Roland Barthes on the semiotic nature of images has been broadened with various perspectives on the study of visual data, on definitions of visual rhetoric, areas of study for visual rhetoric, and approaches to the rhetorical study of visual artifacts (Foss, 2004). In media studies, communication research informed by visual framing analysis remains still relatively under-researched, yet, as Coleman notes in a seminal methodological work, “visual framing provides an important new direction for theory building and future research” (Coleman, 2010).

This article aims to review some of the aforementioned theoretical considerations in relation to the role of visual content on the “Debating Europe” platform, to introduce a series of empirical findings resulting from the analysis of the visual content used on the site, as well as to discuss the theoretical and methodological choices of the analysis. In this respect, it is important to point out a few preliminary observations about the “Debating Europe” platform, identify its main features and how it works.

The platform was created in 2011 by the Brussels-based think tank “Friends of Europe” and the policy journal *Europe’s World*, in partnership with the European Parliament, Microsoft and Gallup (Debating Europe, 2011). Designed as a space of transnational communication, the platform’s creation is linked to the context of two specific developments: on one hand, a symbolic deficit and a lack of communication related to the European Union, weaknesses considered by several studies focusing on the EU public communication, its symbolic dimension (Pribersky, 2006), or its visual discourse (Malherbe, 2011) (Cmeciu & Cmeciu, 2014); on the other hand, the development of new media allowing a virtual dialogue, through online communication channels. By taking advantage of the features provided by the new technologies, the mission of the platform was clearly stated: “to encourage a genuine conversation between

Europe’s politicians and the citizens they serve” (Debating Europe, 2011). The Platform’s mission statement recalls Manuel Castells’ 2008 comment on the dynamics of new media communication, where “it is essential for state actors, and for intergovernmental institutions, such as the United Nations, to relate to civil society not only around institutional mechanisms and procedures of political representation but in public debates in the global public sphere.” (Castells, 2008).

The functionality of the “Debating Europe” platform is assured by the interaction between the site and the site visitor, where the latter can record video questions or send a text question, may suggest a debate that was not yet covered and leave a comment below each debate on the site. The content collected by these means is gradually sorted by specific themes, becoming questions proposed in recorded interviews with policy makers and experts from all over Europe. The published answers, along with the initial topic are integrated in a specific debate published on the website, allowing visitors to comment on the topic and interact with other commenters. Since its launch and the writing of this article, “Debating Europe” gathered more than 600 discussion topics, and generated over 75,000 comments sent from citizens online, counting a growing community of 1.6 million participants and over 245,000 followers on Facebook and Twitter (Debating Europe, 2011).



Figure 1. Page layout for a debate on the “Debating Europe” platform

(Retrieved September 12, 2016, source: [www.debatingeurope.eu/2016/09/07/like-europe-look-like-20-years](http://www.debatingeurope.eu/2016/09/07/like-europe-look-like-20-years))

The site architecture and the visual concept are simple, using a minimalist style. The focus is on the effectiveness of user interaction on every page. Each debate is accompanied by an image illustrating the theme discussed. The images (photographs, drawings, diagrams, icons, etc.) are produced either internally or chosen from Flickr Creative Commons or other image databases.

The debates are organized into seven categories, called “channels”: Asia-Europe, Future, Global, Greener, Quality, Security and Smarter. In a previous study of the “Debating Europe” platform (Coman & Bardan, 2015), we identified several recurring themes discussed on the Global and Asia-Europe channels: economic crisis, migration, education, climate change, poverty, unemployment etc. Also, the debates published on each of the chosen channels were structured within generic frames, as well as within specific frames, and correlated with the five prevalent news frames identified by Semetko & Valkenburg in earlier studies on framing and framing effects: a) attribution of responsibility frame – attributing responsibility for the cause or solution of an event, problem, or issue; b) conflict frame – reflecting the conflict between individuals, groups, and organizations; c) economic consequences frame – reporting an event, problem, or issue in terms of the consequences it will have financially on an individual, groups, organizations, or countries; d) human interest frame – bringing a human face or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue, or problem; e) morality frame – placing the event, problem, or issue in the context of religious tenets or moral prescriptions. (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000, pp. 95-96). Only two frames of this classical scheme occurred in the analyzed content of the “Debating Europe” platform: the “conflict” frame and the “economic consequences” frame.

On the other hand, one can notice that the debates embody complex and abstract notions. Although abundantly covered by the media, these notions are difficult to be represented visually. How does the “crisis” look like, for example? And how is this concept pictured on the “Debating Europe” platform? Translated into a research perspective, these questions point to a broad range of issues related to the role of visual content, from the enhancement of reading and memorization (Ong, 2011) to the power of visual framing when examining effects of news coverage (Arpan, et al., 2006).

## **Theoretical framework, research questions, method**

Choices are to be made depending on our research objectives: consider a visual communication model of the “Debating Europe” platform, along with the analysis of the visual content provided. Further explorations of the technological, communicational and political dimensions of the platform are needed.

According to Central, the company that designed the actual “Debating Europe” platform, traditional web 2.0 technologies were employed, using a blog to start the project. Interaction was designed right from the start as a one-step process, with no registration required: a simple form was provided, where users were asked to enter a name (or a nickname), the text comment and a valid email, the latter not being published. Two years after its launch, a collaboration with Central was initiated in order to increase participation in the debates and optimize user experience. After a prototyping stage, several changes were made, concerning mainly site architecture, organization of content, page layout and structure for the debates. Central also optimized readability and usability, enhancing user-experience with tools specific to debaters’ needs, such as search bar, a visible and accessible button for joining the debate, and social media tools. The end result increased the number of views and user interaction on the platform (Central, 2016). Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the page layout for the same debate, before and after redesigning the platform.

From a communicational point of view, the “Debating Europe” platform shares some features with blogs, online magazines and newspapers, by its approach to editorial control. Choices of the title, the body-text, video or text responses from EU officials, as well as the illustration of the debate are in charge of the platform’s editorial team, a staff of six members. A brief exam of the calendar of debates shows that the publishing schedule is irregular, relying on an edition-based model. Comments are also under editorial control, being moderated, and may be removed by moderators for breaching the code of conduct presented on the “Terms of Use” page. This publishing model differentiates “Debating Europe” from other web-based debating platforms that are crowd curated (Q&A, voting etc.), who let users open topics, ask their own questions, post

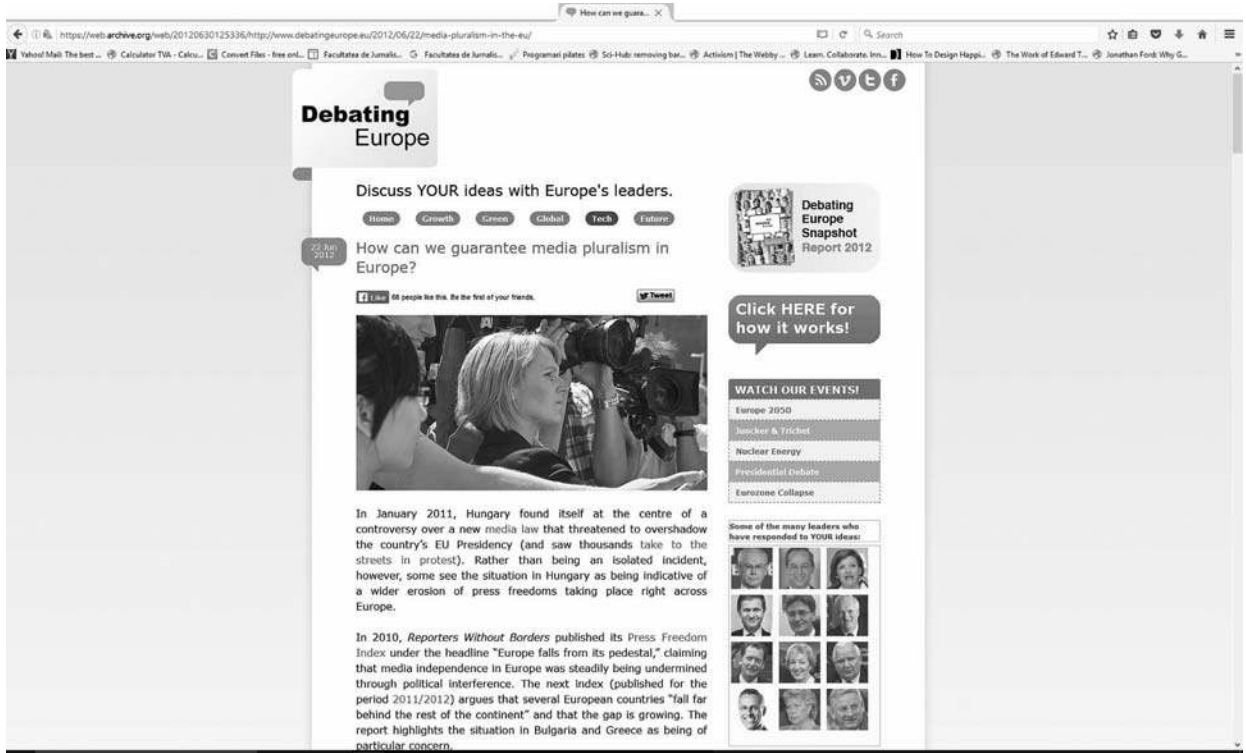


Figure 2. Page layout for the debate “How can we guarantee media pluralism in Europe?”  
 (Retrieved September 12, 2016, source: <https://web.archive.org/web/20120630125336/http://www.debatingeurope.eu/2012/06/22/media-pluralism-in-the-eu/>)



Figure 3. Page layout for the debate “How can we guarantee media pluralism in Europe?”  
 (Retrieved September 12, 2016, source: <http://www.debatingeurope.eu/2012/06/22/media-pluralism-in-the-eu/>)

answers, comment or vote. Another limitation of the bottom-up approach promoted by the site concerns the “bottom-up argumentation” (Toni & Torroni, 2012), as debates are indeed obtained starting from the users’ questions and comments, but topics of debates are selected and edited by the platform’s staff.

In this respect, the “Debating Europe” platform acts more as a mediator between European citizens and politicians and is closer to a “curatorial model”, by filtering user generated content and selecting the topic of the debates to be published. However, curating practices and curators are not promoted as such, but translated as the process of matching users’ comments and questions to EU officials’ responses, while the selection of topics is justified by sheer number of comments received. The selection process is not presented on the site, so this may raise the question whether it is based on a quantitative criteria or not, as well as open an interrogation on the results of the “curatorial model”, seen as the production of discourse and the political potential of this practice.

Finally, the political dimension turns towards the concept of e-democracy, which, according to Ann Macintosh, “can be divided into two distinct areas – one addressing e-participation and the other addressing e-voting”, with the former designing the “the use of information and communication technologies to broaden and deepen political participation by enabling citizens to connect with one another and with their elected representatives.” (Macintosh, 2004). Based on the framework developed by Macintosh to characterize levels of e-democracy initiatives, the bottom-up approach stated by the “Debating Europe” platform corresponds to “E-empowering”, the highest level of participation, by the use of technology to empower citizens. As such, the user generated content resulted from the questions and comments should place the citizens “as producers rather than just consumers of policy” (Macintosh, 2004). However, the absence of information regarding the use of data collected via the comments on the “Debating Europe” platform points, in this case, to the limits of the actual influence on the political agenda of EU officials.

The page layout for the debates follows the same vertical visual structure: the menu on top of the page, followed by the title of the debate, the date and the channel, underneath the illustration in large format, a one-column body-text of the debate and finally the area for comments and the form. Thus, it corresponds

to the classical visual schema for blog posts, inspired by templates used by the major blogging platforms (WordPress, Ghost, Drupal etc). A widget is added on the right side, showing the number of comments of the debates, a call-to-action button emphasized with a vivid yellow, and social media tools. Above the fold (i.e. the visible content on the screen) is visible only a part of the content – mainly the menu, the title, the date and the channel, the illustration and some of the body-text – while the widget remains on screen whatever the scroll on the page. The page layout respects general web design rules and recommendations regarding visual hierarchy, focus, text formatting, use of white space and images (Wright-Porto, 2011) (Culbertson, 2013).

Interrogating the way abstract concepts are pictured comes to consider a visual representation framework. Several aspects are to be highlighted, the first one pointing to the role of visual content: it is already a commonplace the fact that an illustrated text is more attractive and encourages reading. In a study going back to 1979, Bain and Weaver showed that news articles accompanied by pictures had a better readership and a longer attention span than plain texts (Bain & Weaver, 1979). However, there are a number of constraints in the process of illustrating a text. Instrumental literature, such as textbooks and manuals (Brielmaier & Wolf, 1999) (Moen, 2000) (Malamed, 2011), discuss the case of texts dealing with ideas, concepts or sensitive legal or moral issues. Drawings, illustrations, graphics, or staged photos are recommended solutions instead of press photography. On the other hand, as visual semiologists emphasize, the rhetoric of photographic illustrations should strongly be considered in the context of the message and of the text-image relationship (Joly, 2011) (Gervereau, 2004) as well as the text-image interdependence, in reference to Roland Barthes on the anchorage and the relay as the two functions of the linguistic message (Barthes, 1964). The case of comics brings particular solutions of visual representation, as Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle notes (2008), treating the text as a visual object, and the image a paratextual element that tends to be sufficient in itself.

Another theoretical source for this study is the framework dealing with visual framing, inspired by the framing theory in media research. According to Coleman (2010, p. 234), one of the main impediments in this area concerns the lack of appropriate

methodologies for coding visual images. Second, the large majority of visual framing studies focuses more on the production of frames in media discourse, and less on the participants' visual meaning-making processes (Coleman, 2010) (Douai, 2014), the latter leaning on experimental approaches with results discussed within certain limitations, such as research participants and research design (Arpan, et al., 2006) (Powell, de Swert, de Vreese, & Boomgaarden, 2015). Due to the methodological limitations above mentioned, we will focus on the construction and production of frames in media discourse, and not the framing effects. Useful here is the approach of Cmeciu, Cmeciu and Patrut (2014) in a study of Romanian communication campaign blogs, who consider the double meaning of the concept of "framing": first, selecting those aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient, inspired by a definition of Entman (1993), and second, the compositional framing of photographic images, which through certain choices (camera angle, focus and distance) can select what it is important to show, and therefore play a key role in influencing the reception of media coverage for an event or issue. Another reference comes from the cited study of Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), with the option for a deductive approach that involves "predefining certain frames as content analytic variables to verify the extent to which these frames occur in the news" (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000, p. 98). Still, Coleman questions the pertinence of these frames, as well as those identified by Iyengar (1991), for the analysis of visuals (Coleman, 2010, p. 241). For Coleman, notions such as "conflict" and "human interest" can be inferred from visual content, but other frames seem to be problematic, e.g. "morality" and "economic consequences". Assuming Coleman's interrogation, this article will develop a case study on two generic frames, "attribution of responsibility" and "economic consequences", translated into a couple of research questions:

Q1: How are the frames "attribution of responsibility" and "economic consequences" pictured as visual content on the "Debating Europe" platform?

Q2: Can the two frames mentioned above be identified in the visual content related to the notions "responsibility" and "economic crisis"?

### *Method*

For Q1, a "frame-to-visual content" approach will be used, within a socio-semiotic visual analysis (Gervereau, 2004) in order to identify, in the first place, the visual representations of the frames "attribution of responsibility" and "economic consequences". The unit of analysis is set to contain the image and the title of the debate, as the main two elements that are viewed at first glance on the page's layout, and in reference to Coleman's pertinent observation that "It is artificial for research to view one channel of communication in isolation" (Coleman, 2010, p. 235). The analysis of the visual content will follow three key benchmarks: a) how the image is produced and its specifications; b) the text-image relationship, with a focus on the relationship between the image and the title of the debate; c) the interdependence text-image, drawing on the rhetorical dimension of the image; all of the above informed by the same visual hierarchy, a constant in the layout of the debates.

For Q2, a "visual-content-to-frame" approach will be employed, inspired by the methodology of Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), in order to measure whether the generic frames "economic consequences" and "attribution of responsibility" can be identified in the visual content published on the "Debating Europe" platform. In their study, the aforementioned authors tested the prevalence of five news frames using a series of 20 questions as framing measures to which the coder had to answer yes (1) or no (0). We will assume and adapt this method to our study, while a secondary goal of this step is to examine if and to what extent these framing measures are also suitable for our analysis. The measuring criteria used will be the inter-coder agreement, as the binary coding strategy allows to consider "the extent to which the different judges tend to assign exactly the same rating to each object." (Tinsley & Weiss, 2000).

The research corpus was selected from the "Debating Europe" platform, focusing solely on the debates published between 2011 and 2015, meaning more than 600 debate topics (Coman & Bardan, 2015). For the configuration of the corpus, the site's search function was used, by turn, for two keywords: "responsibility" and "economic crisis", ruling out the results pointing to debates published after December

2015. For “responsibility” the inquiry brought 49 results, while for “economic crisis” there were 58 results. However, both bodies of images were not exactly valid, in view of the fact that at a closer analysis of the results, for “responsibility” there was only one debate containing the notion in the title of the debate, while for “economic crisis” there were only two direct references. In both cases, the inquiry results brought both keywords as a contextual notion, related to an issue presented in the text of the debate, but not as the main topic. All these results were kept, except the ones where the notions enquired were found only in the comments section. As such, the corpus no longer corresponded to the established unit of analysis, while the key benchmarks selected previously couldn’t be used anymore for the content analysis of the visual content. With no valid visual data to be analyzed, Q1 was ruled out.

For Q2, the framing items regarding “economic consequences” and “attribution of responsibility” were selected from the methodology provided by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000, p. 100), resulting in the following list of questions:

**Economic consequences**

- Is there a mention of financial losses or gains now or in the future?
- Is there a mention of the costs/degree of expense involved?

- Is there a reference to economic consequences of pursuing or not pursuing a course of action?

**Attribution of responsibility**

- Does the story suggest that some level of government has the ability to alleviate the problem?
- Does the story suggest that some level of the government is responsible for the issue/problem?
- Does the story suggest solution(s) to the issue/problem?
- Does the story suggest that an individual (or group of people in society) is responsible for the issue/problem?
- Does the story suggest the problem requires urgent action?

However, for Q2 a few methodological adjustments were also needed.

The figure N° 4, below, illustrates the body of images gathered with the keyword “economic crisis”. The visual content is quite diverse, ranging from icons and drawings to composite images made up of various photographs, as well as documentary and press imagery. A similar typology of visuals can be found for the corpus built on the “responsibility” keyword.

The coding of the visual content was performed by two independent coders. But, a closer exam of the body of images showed that the coding strategy proved to be problematic: because visual images alone are not explicit and can engage different



**Figure 4.** Body of images retrieved using the key word “economic crisis” (Images courtesy of www.debatingeurope.eu, illustration by the author)

associations of ideas (Joly, 2011), the coding process could not rely exclusively on the questions listed above. On the other hand, reiterating Coleman’s methodological caution, the illustration of a debate should be considered alongside with the title, as they occur together in the layout of the debate. In this respect, the unit of analysis was set to the image and the title, respecting also the visual order on the web page, with the title above the image. Furthermore, to enhance the accuracy of the coding process, we decided to cross reference the framing items also with the text of the debates, whenever the question items should not cluster appropriately. If the unit analyzed

could not be correlated with either of the questions, a “No category” cluster was added. The inter-coder agreement was measured using Holsti’s variation of the percent agreement, as  $Agreement = 2N / (N1 + N2)$ , where N is the total number of coding decisions agreed upon, while N1 and N2 count the number of coding decisions of the first and the second coder, respectively (Holsti, 1969).

**Findings**

For the “economic consequences” frame, the units were clustered as following:

	Is there a mention of financial losses or gains now or in the future?	Is there a mention of the costs/degree of expense involved?	Is there a reference to economic consequences of pursuing or not pursuing a course of action?	No category
Coder A	11 units	9 units	26 units	12 units
Coder B	12 units	10 units	28 units	8 units
Inter-coder agreement	4 units (.34)	4 units (.42)	15 units (.55)	8 units (.80)

**Table 1.** The “economic consequences” frame and inter-coder agreement

For the “attribution of responsibility” frame, the units were clustered as following:

	Does the story suggest that some level of government has the ability to alleviate the problem?	Does the story suggest that some level of the government is responsible for the issue/problem?	Does the story suggest solution(s) to the issue/problem?	Does the story suggest that an individual (or group of people in society) is responsible for the issue/problem?	Does the story suggest the problem requires urgent action?	No category
Coder A	11 units	12 units	15 units	10 units	1 unit	0 units
Coder B	8 units	9 units	17 units	14 units	1 unit	0 units
Inter-coder agreement	4 units (.42)	2 units (.19)	8 units (.50)	5 units (.41)	1 unit (1)	-

**Table 2.** The “attribution of responsibility” frame and inter-coder agreement

**Discussion and conclusion**

The pertinence of each of the two frames was empirically estimated with a specific set of framing questions. We chose to elaborate on a method that has already proven reliable for news media, still, in this case, the generic-frame measurements from Semetko and Valkenburg were used to test also the coding process of visual content.

For the “economic consequences” frame, each coder clustered a corpus of 58 units of analysis. From a quantitative viewpoint, the coders assigned a fairly similar number of units for each question, while the “No category” cluster gathered also a 10.17% of the units analyzed. The question pointing to a reference to “economic consequences of pursuing or not pursuing a course of action” scored the highest number of units, as well as the highest level of inter-coder agreement (0.55).



For the “attribution of responsibility” frame, the corpus contained 49 units of analysis. There are two notable differences relatively into the previous case: first, all data was coded within the questions provided, and second, differences in assigning units to the framing measures were bigger. The question related to the “suggestions of solution(s) to the issue/problem” scored the highest numbers, both in terms of image coding and level of inter-coder agreement (0.50). Given more coding questions and explicit interrogations, the inter-coder agreement for the “attribution of responsibility” frame was expected to be superior as compared to the “economic consequences” frame.

Overall, results seem inconclusive: on one hand, the coding scheme used scored a high percentage of data coding, while, on the other hand, the inter-coder agreement points to an average below .50. As such, the generic-frame measurements from Semetko and Valkenburg may prove to be a fair starting point for coding visual content, but calls the need for additional content analytic variables in order to achieve reliable and valid data to work with. Several limitations of our case study can underline improvements to be addressed. A first set of limitations is related to the corpus: the sampling process relied on the search function of the “Debating Europe” platform, retrieving a pretty low number of results. Knowledge on the search algorithm may enhance data sampling based on the choice of different key-words. Data capture and corpus building implied a conversion from electronic form to a small scaled printed model (100 x 70 mm) of the unit of analysis, therefore the change of medium, from screen visualization to paper handling is a factor that may alter the coding process. The latter is also subject for improvements; only two, non-native English speakers were used, possessing a C2 (CEFR) language level. Although performed by experienced users of English, the coding process required correlations that may be interpreted different by a native English speaker. The configuration of the unit of analysis (the title of the debate and the illustration used) stressed a couple of issues: post-interviews with the coders revealed that the anchorage function of the title proved to be the main criteria in the process of assigning a unit of analysis to a framing item, recalling the problem of data capture and medium conversion. Furthermore, the content analyzed was extracted from the debates, where the titles were expressed in most of the cases

as a question to be responded, so the coders had to correlate a question to another question, the visual data becoming accessory in the process. In this respect, additional variables related to technical specifications of the images (focus, visual hierarchy of elements, compositional framing etc.) may optimize the coding process.

Our aim was to evaluate the pertinence of two generic frames, “attribution of responsibility” and “economic consequences”, for a visual framing analysis of the visual content published on the “Debating Europe” platform between 2011 and 2015, using a two-fold approach. The first one considered the visual representation of the two frames, but the sampling process based on keyword search resulted in a corpus that lacked representative and exhaustive data. The second approach assessed the extent to which the two frames could be expressed within visual frames, using a methodology established in textual analysis. Although the application of Semetko and Valkenburg’s framing items yielded acceptable results, the case study showed, in fact, several limits of the coding process, the necessity of additional content analytic variables, opening also an interrogation on the text-image dialectics in visual communication and text versus image effects (Boomgaarden, Boukes, & Iorgoveanu, 2016).

Even though our study is based on a convenience corpus, and furthermore acknowledged several limitations, we estimate that the visual framing approach developed here provides valuable insights on the multitude of aspects to consider when elaborating the coding process of visual content. Thus, it draws upon Coleman’s metaphor of the “methodological trail of breadcrumbs” (2010, p. 235), underlining the presence of important, but easy to miss details in research strategies.

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