

**Meta-frames and transnational homogenisation in news content depicting multilateral trade negotiations. One frame to rule them all?**

Based on a quantitative content analysis of 776 newspaper articles on the WTO Doha Development Agenda (DDA) negotiations, this article combines new institutional media theory and framing theory to explore the international news coverage of WTO negotiations. The main conclusion is that news coverage of WTO negotiations has become institutionalised around what is termed a common meta-frame, here labelled the 'neo-liberal development frame'. Institutionalisation is viewed as the result of a two-axial homogenisation of news content, a situation where news content is fixed across both time and space. The concept of meta-frame is introduced to denote a common narrative containing the same defining elements as individual news frames but underlying many different framings of individual news stories.

Employing new institutional media theory allows the article to touch upon the wider political significance of a situation where coverage is characterized by an institutionalized meta-frame. It argues that institutionalisation of news coverage is most likely to evolve around prolonged and technically complex negotiations dealing with unobtrusive international issue-areas such as trade or climate change.

**INTRODUCTION** - The WTO Doha Development Agenda negotiations have stumbled on since their launch in 2001, with each negotiation breakthrough soon to be followed by a stall jeopardizing the progress made and pitching national trade interests against each other. The widespread belief in fair and free trade as a an improvement to today's international trade patterns - ripe with subsidies and taxes discriminating against foreign products - has, at the same time, led actors as different as the World Bank and international NGO's Oxfam and the Carnegie Endowment, to portray Doha Development Agenda (DDA) as the deal that could save the world's poor from being poor.

The odd combination of huge potential and seemingly insurmountable differences has haunted negotiations and has often prompted competitive finger pointing and an intense public blame game among negotiators after yet another negotiation bust. The battle about whose agricultural subsidies do the most harm to the billions of poor farmers in disadvantaged parts of the world has mainly been played out between the EU and the US, but has also featured countries such as Korea, Japan, and Norway. Even major developing countries such as India or Brazil have

been implicated, occasionally starring the glamorous role as global developmental referee but in other occasions cast as the self-interested development country dinosaur thwarting the interests of the *really* poor and vulnerable.

This paper will look inductively at how the WTO negotiations are portrayed in international print news media. It will analyze coverage across five different countries and span the four WTO summits taking place in the 2001-2006 period. The analysis will seek out transnational regularities in news content and employ new institutionalist media theory to conceptualize persistent and robust regularities as content institutionalisation - that is, institutionalized traits of the news agenda, such as e.g. a persistent description of the trade talks as being about furthering development or of the main problem in the talks as being the unequal distribution of negotiation resources.

The paper is exclusively explorative in that it will only seek to *identify* institutionalized parts of DDA news coverage, without aiming to *explain why* coverage has these regularities or *who* might be driving news coverage. This would require, firstly, a fully different methodology looking not only at news content but also at the political and social forces at work in setting the media agenda. Secondly, to explain news coverage in five countries located on four different continents across a five-year period, it would either require a project of enormous scope or a incredibly simplified view of the factors that may influence news content. Thus, the aim is not to explain that the news provides an institutional image of what the talks are about *because of* this or that actor influencing coverage or this or that media setting the agenda for the rest, but simply explore *if* we can find institutionalized aspects of the news image of WTO negotiations.

In working within the new institutionalist media theory framework, though, the article will argue that regardless of why coverage has been institutionalized, the finding that it has been institutionalized is (perhaps even more) important in itself. This finding means that, as with all other institutions, the institutionalized news agenda will be resistant to change and thus influence coverage across time, space, and media outlet, acting as a constraint upon both news producers and political actors seeking to influence the news agenda.

Identifying institutionalisation in all major parts of the agenda studied, the paper will further aim to show how one common portrait can be seen as connecting the different institutionalized parts of the news agenda,

thus itself representing what is here labeled an *institutionalized meta-frame*. An institutionalized meta-frame is conceptualized as a common frame connecting the institutionalized descriptions found on the news agenda into a meaningful image - an image whose parts appears scattered across hundreds of texts, and maybe not clearly articulated in any single location. The institutionalized meta-frame is best thought of as something akin to a background guide to how to understand WTO negotiations - not determining the content or framing of any particular news story, but influencing bits and pieces of coverage here and there, pointing the aggregated picture towards certain understandings of what is going on - or even possible - in the WTO negotiations, and away from other.

The paper will first elaborate on the link between institutional media theory and framing theory. Thereafter, the data the analysis is based on will be presented, and the analysis will be contextualised by looking briefly at the WTO negotiations and news coverage thereof. Next step will be to show how different aspects of coverage have across time become steadily more homogeneous across the different countries, leading to institutionalisation. The concept of a meta-frame will be brought into the analysis and the paper will give an account of how the neo-liberal development frame can be seen as underlying the traits seen in coverage. Lastly, the paper will preliminarily discuss the conditions conducive to institutionalisation of meta-frames

#### **FUSING INSTITUTIONAL MEDIA THEORY AND FRAMING THEORY -**

The central theoretical aim of this paper is to combine insights from framing theory as developed by Entman (Entman 1993, 2004, 2006) with an understanding of social change drawn from new institutional theory (Hall & Taylor 1996; Aspinwall & Schneider, 2000) and specifically new institutional media theory as developed by Cook (1998).

This study looks at news content through the conceptual lens of institutional media theory. This emergent media research programme has already produced a number of highly interesting outcomes, as is evident from the 2006 special issue of *Political Communication* devoted to the emergent research programme<sup>1</sup>.

Two basic uses of institutional media theory can be detected in the research so far. First, Tim Cook's path breaking research constituted the field by convincingly

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<sup>1</sup> See *Political Communication* vol. 23, no. 2 (2006)

arguing how fruitful insights can come from looking at the news media as an overarching though not always internally coherent institution of governance - akin to e.g. the interest group system. Cook's work was inspired by mainly sociological new-institutionalism and nailed down how routines, assumptions, etc. are shared across the field of media professionals - whether journalists, editors, or sources - and how this contributes to the homogeneity of news making. (Cook 1998) This work laid the foundation for institutional media studies and continues to form the background for most research projects using this approach.

Second, a more content-focused strand is evident. Here, both Entman (2006) and Lawrence (2006) set out studying news content, as opposed to work routines, and seek to employ institutionalism in an exploratory manner, as providing the theoretical background for where and when to expect homogenisation of news content. (Ryfe 2006: 135; 141). By identifying certain news frames and assessing their compatibility with existing institutions, they provide interesting insights to the framing patterns observable in how the US press has covered major events from the Iraq war, the battle for Fallujah, and the Abu Ghraib prison scandal. They thus demonstrate that institutionalist theory can be applied in a 'bottom up' approach moving from patterns in news content to institutional patterns of rules, assumptions, and routines, rather than focusing on these rules etc. and assuming that they matter for coverage.

This study will use input from both approaches to institutional media studies. It will draw on Cook's conceptualisation of institutions as non-material organizers of behaviour<sup>2</sup> enjoying stability across time and space, leading to the important political implication that "day in and day out, certain kinds of political actors, political stories, and political issues become more covered and more favourably reported than others" (Cook, 2005: 87). These insights will be used both as a background for the analysis and in the selection of data and design of analysis.

On the other hand the study will, in line with e.g. Lawrence (2006), analyze the patterns found in news content

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<sup>2</sup> Cook conceptualises institutions as "explicit rules, expectations, unspoken procedures, routines and assumptions [that] points not merely to formal structures that serve to constrain individual choice but to social patterns of behaviour valued in and of themselves" (Cook 2005: 66-67).

and aim to show where and when homogenisation occurs and institutionalisation thus can be inferred.

A striking feature covering most of the work in both strands of institutional media theory is that research is mainly focused on a particular nation (usually the US)'s national media outlets, and has yet to come to grasp with the transnational dynamics of news production and circulation.

Against this background, this study seeks to explore how these transnational dynamics can be observed from an institutionalist point of view, shedding light on the transnational homogenisation of news content dealing with a major international negotiation effort, the WTO Doha Round.

The research developed in this paper combines the institutionalist agenda with framing theory. In this respect, it shares a common aim with Entman (2006), but, as we shall see, it also departs from his approach in various ways.

First, and most important, this article draws on Entman's work on news frames as an important part of its theoretical background. Framing theory is concerned with "the process of selecting and highlighting some aspects of a perceived reality, and enhancing the salience of an interpretation and evaluation of that reality" (Entman 2004: 26), and so is the present study. The parts of the agenda studied here parallels the functional elements of frames as laid out by Entman - to "promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation" (Entman 1993: 52, see also Entman 2006: 217). This enabled this article to develop the concept of a meta-frame in response to coherent institutionalisations going on in all the corresponding parts of the DDA media agenda. Thus, as we shall see, the meta-frame contains an account of the situation at hand, the problem to be solved, the causal mechanisms and actors causing the problem, why the problem is problematic, and how to go about solving the problem.

Second, whereas Entman takes the existence of specific frames as a starting point, calculating the relative presence of different elements supporting a government frame and an opposition frame respectively, this study takes the frame as its end rather than starting-point. Thus, what this paper looks at is the relative presence of a high number of different portrayals of the WTO negotiations, found through iterative reading of a subset of coverage, and whether these scattered elements of the portrayal of negotiations add up to a coherent frame. In contrast, Entman (2006: 218) analyzes the presence of a

variety of elements supporting a dichotomous set of pre-defined frames.

Third, whereas Entman uses the news item as his basic unit, focusing on whether a frame is supported or not, but not how much, (Entman 2006: 219) the present analysis has the individual utterance as its key unit, allowing for a finer grid where a story mentioning an element 20 times and its opposite 2 times would not be treated as balanced but as heavily favoring the first element. This study thus goes some way towards the refinement of the analysis that Entman calls for when outlining his relatively 'brute' approach to how to measure news content (Entman 2006: 219)

Taken together, these two differences mean that whereas Entman assess the presence of pro- and anti-government framing elements in individual news story, this analysis allows for framing elements to be scattered on levels lower than an individual news item, combines the different observed elements, and from there tries to assess whether some elements seem to become institutionalised, and whether these elements add up to a coherent meta-frame, or represent opposing trends. The concept of meta-frame is developed to emphasize this feature - that the analysis does not rest on frames found in individual news items but represents the analyst's inference of a meaning structure deemed prominent based on a data analysis of which individual statements have been prominent in coverage.

**RESEARCH DESIGN** - This article is based upon a quantitative content analysis of 776 news<sup>3</sup> articles from newspapers in Argentina, India, Spain, UK, and the US respectively. Data was selected so as to include a business newspaper as well as a left-of-center and right-of-center newspaper from each country and the sampling period was limited to the four WTO-summits in the 2001-2006 period, sampling coverage from two weeks before to two weeks after each summit. This was decided upon against the background that almost no scholarly attention had been paid to the interconnection between media coverage and trade negotiations<sup>4</sup>, and the perceived need of a broad compara-

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<sup>3</sup> The study thus exclusively deals with information-based journalistic news genres, as opposed to opinion-based genres of articles that can be found in a newspaper. Information-based journalistic news genres all adhere to the 'journalistic norms' of intended objectivity and balanced reporting described in the previous chapter, at least in the way the articles are being presented to the readers

<sup>4</sup> Among the few studies we encountered in the research process was a case study on Belgian press coverage by Swinnen & Francken (2006),

tive overview of content patterns rather than in-depth knowledge of a specific matter. This study therefore points at a) both how the WTO is covered in the news (i.e. which issues, from which angles) and b) includes the comparative elements of *when* and *where* to capture developments over time and geographical variations, which allows for understanding institutionalisation as not 'snapshot homogenisation' at a given point in time, but as a process where content is fixed across both time and space.

The communication processes surrounding WTO negotiations is, understandably, not entirely similar to the ones surrounding national political decision making systems, since both the institutions involved, the decision making mechanisms, the problems being dealt with politically, and the actors involved are different from the ones encountered in the 'familiar' domestic political reporting - be that the Argentinean, Indian, US, UK, or Spanish political system.

Two opposing hypotheses on how this unfamiliarity is dealt with by the press have been presented in research on international news coverage of political events. The first one is that international news content will tend towards *global homogenisation*, because of processes such as the interwoven international news outlets, the spread of professional standards of political news reporting, and, crucially, the influence of international news agencies (Paterson 2003). The other is, that international news will undergo a process of *domestication*, where 'remote' international news is made more interesting by adding references to related domestic problems or adding views of well-known domestic actors, thus situating the 'strange' foreign news in the domestic context and within a familiar frame of reference (Clausen 2003, see also Ørsten 2004)

As this project seeks out transnational content homogenisation, it is touching upon and will somehow speak to these differing perspectives. It will be tempting to try to evaluate the perspectives in the light of the findings of this study, but two comments are important not to draw premature conclusions in this respect. First, the design of the present study is optimized to grasp transnational institutionalisation and therefore is not well fitted to judge whether transnational news has been domesticated. This could happen in ways not graspable by the methodology employed by adding specific perspectives (these would only show up if they were so uniform that they influenced the country aggregates in a specific way) or by using domestic sources (since sources are not part of the present

investigation, only how negotiations are depicted in terms of purposes, problems, victims, and villains) Second, in order not to predetermine the outcome by reading global news as local, news articles from the main driver behind global homogenisation, international news agencies such as EFE or Reuters has been left out. The production of news agencies themselves is not part of the analysis, and news agency articles are not considered when they appeared reprinted in the newspapers analyzed<sup>5</sup> - and this of course limits the ability of the present study to say anything meaningful about a perspective that views news agencies as a driving force. That said, the influence of news agencies is likely influence the articles selected for this study through informing the coverage produced under the byline of newspaper staff.

Apart from the above effort to design the analysis to make a 'least likely' case for transnational homogenisation by excluding news agencies, it is instructive to briefly outline how considerations from agenda-setting and institutional media theory have influenced the research design.

A PROBLEM-BASED APPROACH - As the introduction suggests, this article builds upon the basic finding of agenda-setting theory, that the media is an important factor in shaping politics. Below the basic view of how press coverage is seen to influence trade policy formation and trade negotiation in the WTO is sketched out. This study employs the standard variables of agenda setting by examining how much, which issues and themes have been covered (priming) and from which angles these issues have been covered (framing). But the article looks at priming and framing through the prism of institutional media theory, and is therefore primarily concerned with when and how a homogenisation of priming and framing can be observed.

A political agenda - whether in the political, public, or in the media arena - is in this article seen as *a prioritised set of issues that are perceived to be problems*

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<sup>5</sup> This selection is debatable, since including what the newspaper includes would give a more accurate view of what is communicated to the average reader. But including reprinted news agency reports would leave open the possibility that some of the homogenisation found could be due to newspapers increasingly relying on news agencies, rather than correspondents or staff reporters.



*which require political attention*<sup>6</sup>. This definition of agendas means, first of all, that agendas are intersubjective social constructs. There is no such thing as an 'objective' problem in agenda-setting (Dearing & Rogers, 1996: 22). It is the *perception* of the issues as being problems requiring political attention that makes them part of the agenda. The intersubjective and socially constructed nature of agendas means that agendas - even though they can confront actors as given social facts - cannot be completely fixed but will, at least in the longer run, be subject to changes.

*Problems* are seen as the basic component of political issues and agendas since non-problems are per definition not perceived as something requiring political attention. And the *prioritisation* of the issues on the agenda indicates that while some issues are seen as problems *that require political attention*, other issues are perceived problems but deserving none or little political attention (Dearing & Rogers, 1996: 1-2)<sup>7</sup>.

Since problematic issues are seen as the nucleus of agenda-setting theory, the content analysis behind this article is structured around the basic units of problems, namely *what* is the problem, *who* is seen as responsible for solving the problem, and *who* is seen as threatened by it. (Brändgård & Kuipers, 2003).

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<sup>6</sup> This definition of an agenda is inspired by A) the Danish Media scholar Anker Brink Lund, and B) the American agenda-setting researchers, James W. Dearing and Everett M. Rogers. A): Lund states that "the precondition for being heard in the political debate is to successfully have your aim defined as a publicly relevant problem (Lund, 2002: 17, my translation from Danish). B) Dearing & Rogers propose a three-step agenda-setting definition though they do not actually call it a three-step definition themselves. Firstly, they define an *agenda* as "...a set of issues that are communicated in a hierarchy at a point in time." (Dearing & Rogers, 1996: 2). Secondly, they define an *issue* as "...a social problem, often conflictual, that has received mass media coverage. Issues have value because they can be used to political advantage." (Dearing & Rogers, 1996: 3, building on the work of Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994). Thirdly, they define *salience* as the key to understanding agenda-setting: "Salience is the degree to which an issue on the agenda is perceived as relatively important." (Dearing & Rogers, 1996: 8).

<sup>7</sup> Actors can influence the agenda-setting both intentionally and unintentionally. "Journalists can set the agenda without trying, just by doing their job" (Linsky, 1986: 89), and the agenda-setting process is the result of both *intentional* and *unintentional* action by the relevant actors, i.e. journalists, politicians, and the people who buy the paper to read the news. This contrasts somewhat with the (US) mainstream conception of agenda-setting as "an ongoing competition among issue proponents to gain the attention of the media professionals, the public and policy elites" (Dearing & Rogers, 1996: 1-2, 6)

Ultimately, agenda-setting is not just about prioritising some issues as more politically problematic than others. Involved in the prioritization process is also from which particular *perspective* the issue is viewed as a problem, indicating *how* it is viewed to be requiring political attention. This is usually termed as the *framing* of problems, and was included in the research design as a specific topic.

The concept of meta-frame was not a part of the original research setup, but emerged in response to the findings, as an attempt to capture the common traits of the highly institutionalized agenda. This concept thus did not guide the questions asked or methods employed in the data processing.

### **INSTITUTIONALISATION AND HOMOGENIETY ACROSS THE PRESS**

**AGENDA** - The analysis of the agenda is divided into five sub-analyses following the coding questions asked. Each part of the analysis thus portray a distinct aspect of the overall media agenda on the DDA negotiations and the sub-analyses link up as complementary parts of a single picture looking at the press agenda in terms of a set of prioritized political problems relating to a specific negotiation effort.

The presentation of the analysis will proceed by looking at the purpose of negotiations, the issues portrayed (*what* is the problem), issue framing (from *which angle*), responsibility attribution (*who* is seen as responsible for solving the problem), and vulnerability attribution (*who* is seen as threatened by it). These categories were developed through an iterative process departing from an initial focus on definition of the situation, captured through the *purpose* category, and four categories dealing with what is portrayed as *problems*, inspired by agenda-setting theory. But, as it turned out, this process ended up with categories that roughly mirror the four framing functions described above - problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation (Entman 1993: 52).

Following Cook's emphasis on stability across time and space, the basic analysis looked at trends within each sub-agenda across first time and then geographical origin of press coverage.

**THE PURPOSE OF NEGOTIATIONS** - The news descriptions of specific problems encountered in negotiations are situated against a background understanding of purpose, of what negotiations are about, the story of why negotiators spend years discussing digits and formulas, which is sometimes left implicit and sometimes spelled out. The

definition of a purpose of trade talks is important, since the different descriptions of a purpose will guide the audience's attention to the articles and hence their interest in and interpretation of the Doha Round negotiations. So, if the purpose is defined as 'harmonising the tariff structures of countries and furthering progressive liberalisation of certain areas of world trade' it will most probably alert a quite different segment of the readership than if the purpose of trade talks is defined as 'making world trade work for poor third world farmers'.

This chapter will analyse the aggregated trends of purpose definitions, based on each time a journalist has described the Doha Round talks as having a purpose. While some journalists has placed DDA purpose as the central puzzle in their article, mostly the question of a purpose is dealt with by brief one-, two-, or half sentence descriptions, and many articles leave it out altogether.

In this purpose section, the iterative coding method has been used to come up with a list of six different definitions of what the purpose of the Doha Round is:

**Development for the poor** (help developing countries - the official DDA purpose)

**Development for the rich** (help developed countries, often - but not always - invoked with a dose of sarcasm)

**Boost/save world economy** (help, revive or preserve global trade)

**Liberalisation** (help promote free trade, enhance removal of trade barriers)

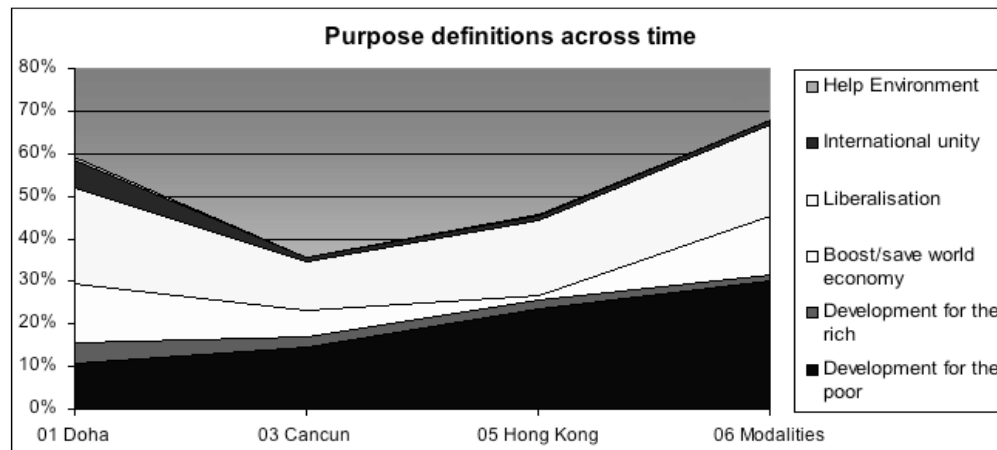
**International security and cooperation** (to demonstrate unity and to combat terror through trade)

**Help Environment** (or help secure sustainable development).

These purposes are drawn from the total data of 775 coded articles. Herein, a subset of 263 articles contains an absolute total of 384 purpose descriptions or references because many articles contain two or more different purpose descriptions or references. But instead of simply reporting absolute numbers, the coverage shares in this article will be in terms of their relative shares of weighted coverage. This ensures that if a purpose (or any of the other categories analyzed) is mentioned on the front page, in the headline, or in the lead paragraph, it is weighted as more important than if it is at the bottom of an article halfway through the newspaper, reflecting

thus the editorial and journalistic importance attached to the statement<sup>8</sup>.

Figure 1: Purpose definitions across time



Starting out by looking at how much coverage each of the different purpose definitions attracts across time, it becomes visible that the official DDA purpose – development for the poor<sup>9</sup> – enjoys a strong and increasingly dominating position in the media coverage of the Doha Round. As figure 1 shows, the purpose definition ‘liberalisation’ are strongest at the onset of negotiations,

<sup>8</sup> The weights have been made as simple as possible, since there is no firm consensus on to add weights when comparing different newspapers from different cultures.

Editorial choices have thus been given the following weights: If an article is put on the front page, all statements in it have been multiplied by 5. If an article is put on the front page of other sections than the front page, all statements in it have been multiplied by 2.5. Otherwise, all problems references thus simply account for one.

The journalistic choices used to weight data, are whether the mention of a specific problem is placed in the headline (multiplied by 5), in the lead, which here means within the first two sentences of the article (multiplied by 2.5), or in the body of the text (not multiplied). Also, problem references that the journalist has chosen to back by more than one source has been added weight according to the number of sources used in the article to denote the issue as a problem. This weight is however much lower than the headline/lead/body-distinction, so multiplication will be as follows: 2 sources weight 1,05; 3 sources 1,10; 4 sources 1,15; 5 sources 1,20; more than 5 sources 1,30.

In order to calculate the total weight of any observation, the different weights (editorial, journalistic, sources) have been multiplied.

<sup>9</sup> Since ‘development for the rich’ is so marginal that it cannot be included meaningfully in the analysis, ‘development for the poor’ will here be termed ‘development’

but whereas the 'liberalisation' purpose definition is stable across time, 'development' attracts a steadily increasing share of coverage and ends up enjoying a stronger presence than 'liberalisation'.

In terms of traits of institutionalisation on the time dimension, there thus seems to be a clear pattern of agenda contraction across time, since 'development' is attracting more and more coverage, marginalising all other purpose definitions. That said, 'liberalisation' seems to be an institutionalised part of purpose depictions, accounting for roughly 20% of coverage at all times, and 'boost/save world economy' seems to be a strong, but not institutionalized, purpose definition.

Moving on to the geographical analysis of the purpose coverage, the analysed countries' press coverage have been split into two country groups that resemble the countries' positions in the world economy and their position in the WTO negotiations. The first is the G20 group, from which the press coverage from Argentina and India is analysed, and the second is the OECD group, from which the coverage from Spain, UK, and USA is analysed.

Due to time and resource constraints the data is not analyzed according to individual countries, but divided into to groups, one encompassing the OECD-countries in the study (the US, the UK and Spain) and the other the 'emerging economies' grouped in WTO under the umbrella of G20 (Argentina and India)<sup>10</sup>.

Dividing the coverage into country groups reveals that the findings above are highly stable across the geography dimension. From the figure below, it is visible that the OECD newspapers have a higher propensity to put each and all of the six purpose definitions on their agendas than the G20 newspapers do.

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<sup>10</sup> Intra-group coherence tests were conducted to ensure that group figures do not hide widely divergent national trends. These will be reported as we go along.

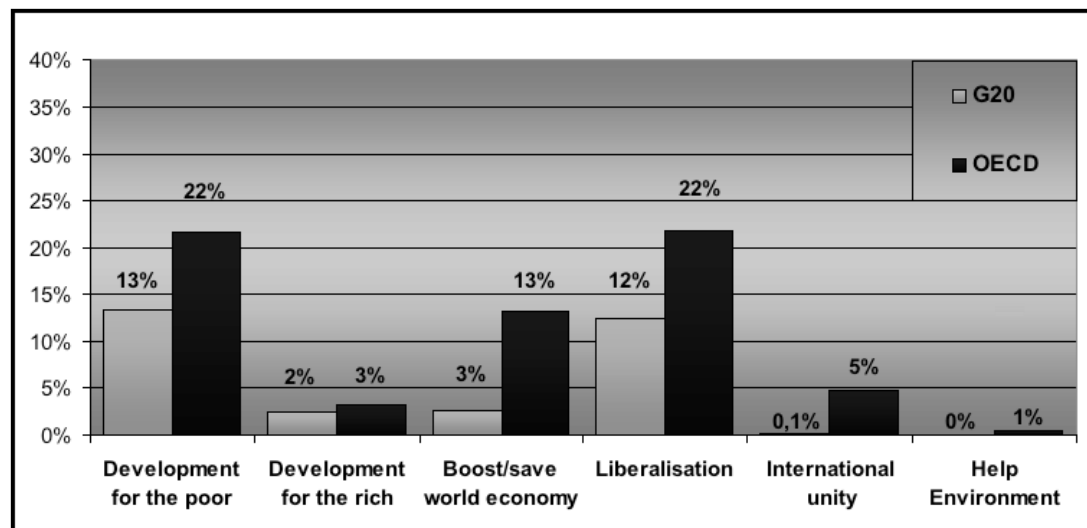


Figure 2: Purpose definitions across geography

Looking at both OECD and G20 papers, the most framed purpose definitions are liberalisation and development for the poor. In OECD papers both purposes account for around 22 % of weighted coverage, and in G20 papers they both account for 12-13 %. In both country groups, the two strongest purpose definitions are thus equal in terms of coverage shares, and this means that the difference between country groups is in the priming of purpose, i.e. the amount of coverage mentioning a purpose, not in the prioritisation between the two major purposes. Since these two purpose definitions together make up the majority of the purpose agenda, this pattern might be interpreted to suggest that the dissimilarity between the two country groups is stable across the different frames used to describe the purpose of the DDA talks. The OECD press might simply mention purpose more frequently than does the G20 press. But G20 and OECD papers share the prioritisation that development for the poor and liberalisation are the major and equally important definitions of the DDA purpose.

Furthermore, the agenda contraction trend found in the time analysis proves to be stable when combining the dimensions time and geography. The agenda contraction where newspapers increasingly focus on 'development', dedicate a stable amount of coverage to 'liberalisation' and marginalise all other purpose definitions is visible to roughly the same degree in both G20 and OECD coverage, a result that further underlines the strength of this trend.

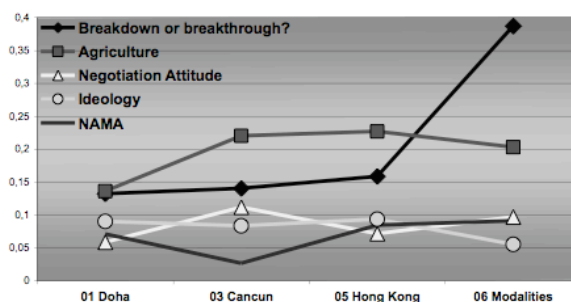
Purpose in sum: high degree of institutionalisation

On an overall level, then, there seems to be strong institutionalisation of two purposes on the agenda. 'Liberalisation' seems institutionalised as a basic feature of coverage irrespective of time and place, and 'development' has been undergoing institutionalisation as increasingly important in coverage across time and space, surpassing 'liberalisation' as the most prominent purpose. In a trend of agenda contraction, these purpose definitions are marginalising all other purposes, except the strong but unpredictably fluctuating 'boost/save world economy' definition driven mainly by the OECD press.

ISSUES ON THE AGENDA - This part of the analysis sheds light on which issues are portrayed as comprising the substance of DDA negotiations<sup>11</sup>. Since not all 30 issues can be thoroughly analyzed and presented, focus will therefore be on the 5 issues most salient in the whole dataset. The flux of these issues across time is depicted in figure 1, which reveals two general trends that will later prove to be quite stable.

As is visible from figure 3, the two issues of breakdown or breakthrough and agriculture clearly emerge as the two top issues in terms of coverage. In the 2001 Doha coverage, neither of these two issues was far from the rest of the top-5, since all issues on the top-5 took up between six and 14 % of total issue coverage. But since then the distance

Figure 3: Top-5 issues



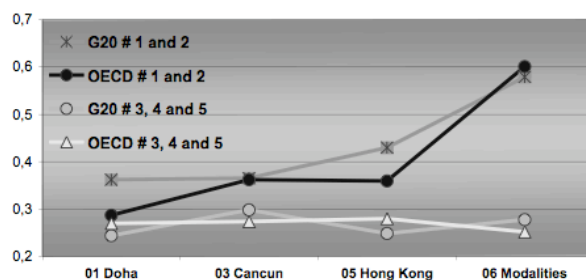
between top-2 and the three other top-5 issues is stably increasing, creating an ever bigger gap between the two top issues and the rest of the issues on the top-5, with the top-2 issues accounting for almost 60% of coverage around the 2006 Modalities meeting. The agenda is thus seen to be characterized by a stable list of top issues

<sup>11</sup> The issues presented here were arrived at through narrowing down an inductively constructed list of problems described in the press coverage. The 90 problems that were reached through the open and iterative coding of news articles have been boiled down to 30 issues describing problem categories.

with a tendency to contract around the most covered issues.

When this figure is broken down according to geographical origin of the press coverage, the stability of the trend is further underscored. Analysing the development of the two grand issues of 'breakdown or breakthrough' and 'agriculture' across the four summits, these two issues have stably been placed as number one and two throughout all summits on both the G20 and the OECD issue agendas, with one exception in the OECD coverage of the Doha summit

Figure 4: G20 and OECD Top-5 issues



where 'TRIPS<sup>12</sup>' came in first and the breakdown or breakthrough issue only came in fourth.

In figure 4 it is visible that the agenda contraction trend discovered in the time section of the issue analysis, applies to both G20 and OECD pa-

pers, although the internal coherence in the G20-group is not too good.

This means that both the G20 and the OECD agendas are being more and more dominated by the two top issues, while the rest of the issues on both agendas are left to share a smaller and smaller part of the total coverage. This points in the direction of even greater similarity between the G20 and OECD press agendas, not least since the contraction trend is also visible in both financial and leading papers in both country groups.

Issues in sum: high degree of institutionalisation  
All in all, the press agendas are deemed to be highly institutionalised across time and across the two country groups of G20 and OECD when it comes to issues being portrayed as important in negotiations. It is close to the same issues being covered in G20 and OECD papers at different points in time. As the summits pass, both the G20 and OECD papers narrow down their agendas to focus on fewer and fewer issues, and accordingly become more and more similar in which issues to cover. However, the low coherence of the G20 group showed that another case selection might have resulted in other issues being on the G20 agenda, thus painting a less institutionalised pic-

<sup>12</sup> TRIPS denotes 'Trade-Related Intellectual Property Rights'



ture of the issue agendas across the G20 and OECD coverage.

So, what does this mean?

At this point it is reasonable to ask oneself 'how surprising are these results? After all, farming is the most contentious issue in the negotiations according to many WTO observers'. So logically, many would say, it is the farm issue that tops the agenda, because the press agenda logically reflects the political agenda.

But here the mantra from agenda setting research deserves repetition: while some issues are on the agenda, others are left out. And when the DDA press agenda is shown to be highly stable and contracting it means that putting alternative issues on the press agenda becomes a more difficult task even for the powerful actors. Having this in mind, the narrow focus means that important WTO issues such as services, negotiation inequalities, Aid for Trade, trade facilitation, the single undertaking, special & differential treatment, world poverty, workers rights, the less-than-full reciprocity principle, the future of WTO Dispute Settlement, WTO democracy and transparency, environment, etc., etc., etc., are not receiving media coverage that enables a larger audience to form qualified opinions on these matters and direct their governments to take the issues into consideration. The point is that the press coverage is indeed biased towards some issues over others, and when this bias is institutionalised, one might think of the press coverage as having a sticky bias. And this sticky bias will naturally affect the press coverage of the future WTO summits, thus making it even harder for other issues, important or not, to become a part of this institutionalised agenda.

PROBLEM FRAMING - Looking at the priming of issues, e.g. which issues are on the agenda, does not necessarily tell much about in which way these issues are on the agenda. In order to understand the similarities and dissimilarities in the media agenda on WTO trade talks better, we now turn to the framing of these issues and investigate whether this framing is also institutionalised.

Conceptualising problem framing

As described in the chapters on agenda-setting and case selection, problem references form the basic unit in the coding procedure of this study, using a broad operational definition of a problem. Doing this, the coding guide was set up to reflect whether the reference to the problem was framed in an anti-liberalisation, pro-liberalisation or neutral tenor.

References framing liberalisation as problematic or protectionism as good are categorised as anti-liberalisation references. For instance, if a problem reference frames the lowering of agricultural subsidies as 'unfeasible', if it criticises an actor for seeking 'harmful liberalisation', or if it poses problems in relation to retaining 'vital protection' of the national economy in a given area, it is deemed as an anti-liberalisation reference framing.

Conversely, references framing protectionism as problematic or liberalisation as good are categorised as pro-liberalisation references. If the problem reference on the other hand describes (e.g. cotton) subsidies as problematic because they impede free trade, if it criticises the poor or rich for seeking to protect their economies too much, or if the reference describes problems in relation to obtaining the vital liberalisation of trade in the e.g. the services sector, it is categorised as a problem reference framed in a pro-liberalisation manner. Problems are deemed to be framed neutrally when they simply describe something as being contentious or causing disagreement. Because the problem framing analysis looks for bias in the value-laden framing of certain problems, it will exclude all neutral problem references. The neutral problem framings that were counted and weighted for this study have thus 'only' been used in the analysis of which issues are on the agenda. Also, references to the main issue 'breakdown or breakthrough' were omitted since these do not have a clear-cut pro- or anti-liberalisation side to them.

#### Liberalisation Ratio: pro-Liberalisation References per anti-Liberalisation Reference

To make the results easier to understand, a measure that gathers the relationship between pro-liberalisation and anti-liberalisation framings within each issue has been constructed; the liberalisation ratio. When constructing this ratio it was designed in such a manner as to provide an intuitive description of the number of pro-liberalisation references per anti-liberalisation reference within any given timely and geographical category. If the liberalisation ratio for agriculture is +3 in the coverage of the Cancun summit, it means that there are three references framing the lack of liberalisation in the farm sector as a problem per each reference framing the liberalisation in the farm sector as a problem. If, on the other hand, this ratio falls to -2 in the coverage of the Hong Kong summit, this means that there are twice as many anti-farm-liberalisation references than there are pro-liberalisation references.

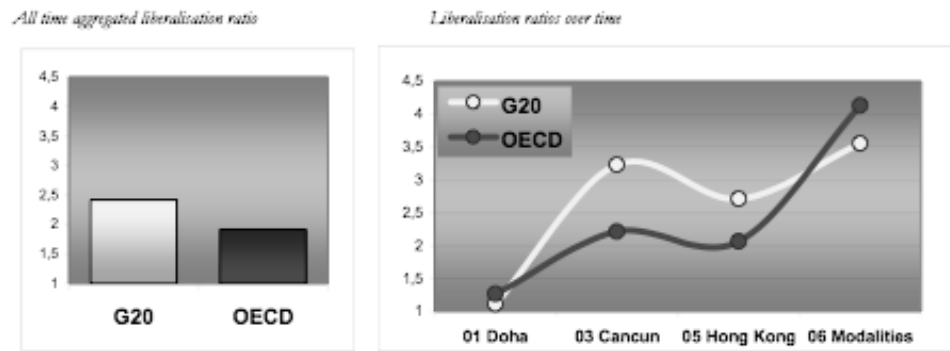


Figure 5: Liberalisation ratios in country groups

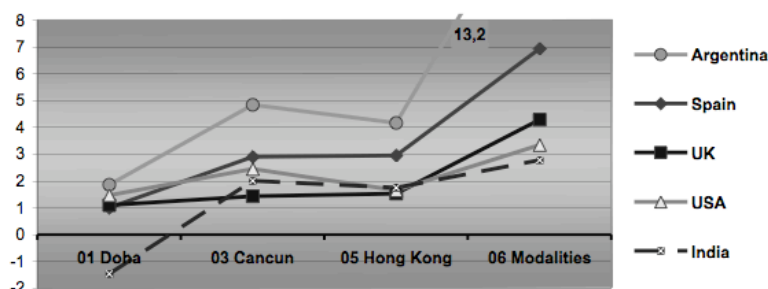
When the liberalisation ratio is assessed using country groups paired with variation across time, a few interesting and contra-intuitive patterns emerge. First, as seen in figure 3, the press coverage in G20 developing countries is framed in more pro-liberalisation terms when looking at the average across the study period. Secondly, there is a striking similarity in the fluctuation trends of the pro-liberalisation bias in the two country groups. This trend is investigated below when disaggregating data to individual country level.

Looking at the liberalisation ratio across time in individual countries reveals that there certainly are differences to be found in how liberalisation-minded the national press is, but these are dwarfed by a staggering similarity in fluctuation trends between all countries analyzed.

Also, we see that group patterns mask huge differences in this instance, since Argentina is much more alike to the

Spain or the US than to India.

Figure 6: Liberalisation ratios in individual countries



The pattern of strong co-fluctuation between all countries suggests that the press in different countries respond in very similar ways to

framing cues coming from the WTO negotiations. And all countries heavily increase pro-liberalisation framings

especially at the 2003 Cancún and 2006 Modalities summits. From the 2003 meeting to the 2005 Hong Kong meeting, the ratio remains stable in the EU countries included whereas it has a weak tendency to decrease slightly in the other countries studied. This tendency is most pronounced in the US and in the heavily pro-liberalisation Argentinean press coverage.

Framing in sum: Strong institutionalisation

Whereas in 2001 one country's coverage is framed in anti-liberalisation terms, and no country has a liberalisation ratio exceeding +/- 2 in 2001 - indicating that no framing dominates as more than double as frequent as its counterpart - the uniform trend towards institutionalisation of pro-liberalisation framing has changed that picture five years after. In 2006 all countries have more than two problem statements framed in pro-liberalisation terms per problem statement framed in anti-liberalisation terms. This relatively strong and uniform trend towards similar reactions to political events and at the same and increasing pro-liberalisation bias in the 2001-2006 period suggests a high degree of institutionalisation of the trend towards pro-liberalisation language, and further demonstrates that international factors indeed can be influential in determining press content.

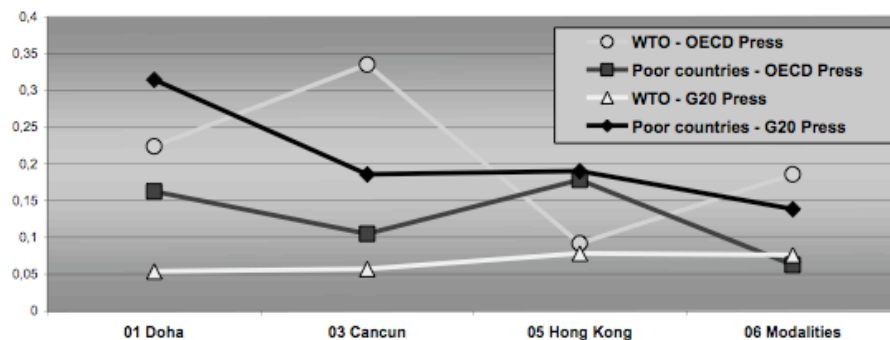
JEOPARDY FRAMING - it was shown that it has been the same main issues on the press agenda across time, and that these issues are increasingly framed in a tenor in favour of liberalisation. But what is lacking is an approximation of for whom the problems are problematic. This section therefore asks if anyone is framed as jeopardised by the problems identified, and who this might be. A problem is always a problem for someone, and without an idea of who would suffer if problems remain unsolved, the press agenda would not be able to motivate much concern among the newspaper readers confronted with this agenda.

A few notes on the methodology are necessary before proceeding: Firstly, the most salient issues have been bundled into one category, 'lack of progress', following the most salient framing of the most salient issues. Secondly, the many different actors that have been framed as jeopardised have been bundled into four major groups - 'rich countries', 'poor countries', 'all countries', and 'the WTO'. Finally, the degree of jeopardy attributed to each jeopardised actor will be depicted as percent of problem coverage.

For reasons of simplicity we only display trends for the two most salient victims in the press: WTO and the poor. From figure 7, three trends are discernible: Firstly, the share of lack of progress stories that mention either WTO or the poor as jeopardised, has fallen in both G20 and OECD news coverage. The G20 and the OECD press thus display some similarity in this regard. The second trend is an indication of the 'domestication' thesis outlined above.

As it is visible, the G20 papers throughout the four summits keep framing the poor as more jeopardised than the OECD papers do. And the OECD papers keep framing the WTO as more jeopardised than the G20 papers do. However,

Figure 7: Jeopardy attribution across time and geography



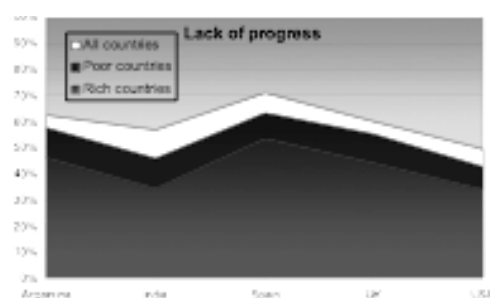
it should be acknowledged that the G20 and OECD framing of jeopardy is actually quite similar at the Hong Kong meeting, which is unexplainable within the domestication framework. But on the whole, OECD papers and G20 papers are very dissimilar in who they frame as the major victim of the lack of progress, thus supporting the 'domestication' thesis. The third trend is that it seems like OECD papers employ a 'residual victim' framing where 'WTO' and 'poor countries' substitute each other as invoked victim. In contrast, the G20 figures seem stable for both the framing of poor and WTO as victimised.

Jeopardy in sum: weak institutionalisation

On an overall level, even though trends are not very similar especially concerning the attribution of jeopardy to the WTO itself, we see a gradual narrowing down of the differences in jeopardy attribution. Institutionalisation of this trend seems weak, however, and the trend mainly expresses itself through less jeopardy attribution in both regions, not narrowing down of the relative differences.

**RESPONSIBILITY FRAMING** - The methodology for studying the responsibility framing is similar to the one employed in studying the jeopardy framing.

Figure 8: Responsibility attribution across countries



Looking at whether different countries' newspapers frame different actors as responsible for not liberalising trade, figure 8 illustrates how the framings are relatively similar, with rich countries bearing the share of blame in all countries under study.

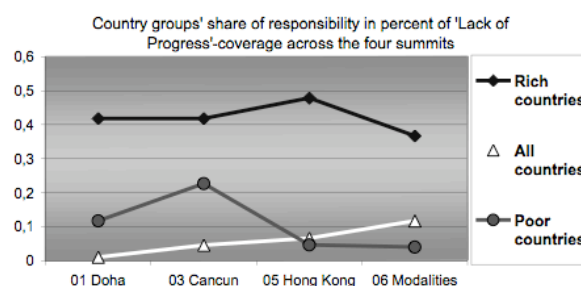
There are some individual country differences,

which seem not to correlate very closely with country groups, and seem to stem mostly from how often responsibility is invoked, since the predominance of rich countries is never questioned.

Looking at the figures across time shows a similar image, although with one modification, namely that the tendency

to attribute blame to poor countries is increasing around the

Figure 9: Responsibility attribution across time



2003 Cancún meeting, only to decrease again. There is also a small tendency to increasingly place blame with all countries rather than just a subset of the negotiating actors. Nevertheless, these are minor observations in a

general picture of a universal tendency to blame rich countries at least twice as often as any other category.

**DISCUSSION: CAN META-FRAMES CAPTURE A CROSSCUTTING THEME FROM ATOMIZED NEWS ARTICLES?**

- When the data for this study was gathered and the data analysis constructed, the analysis was pointed exclusively at institutionalisation of news content, and indeed demonstrated that homogeneity is so consolidated that we can meaningfully speak of institutionalized traits on the DDA media agenda (albeit to varying degrees). Initially, there was no idea of or attempt made to construct an overarching account of the way in which the different parts of the agenda connect, such as how the pro-liberalisation framing (which would intuitively suggest that western countries get their message across) fits with the responsibility attribution to rich countries (which would suggest quite the contrary). Against this background, the meta-frame is suggested as a tool not to gather the framing of any individual news article but rather to gather an overarching narrative that connect different traits found to be prominent in separate spheres of the news agenda.

If we fill in the content of each institutionalised part of the agenda, something like this emerges: The Doha Round is portrayed as being about development and liberalisation. The dominant issues are increasingly breakdown or breakthrough and the issue of agriculture.

These issues are increasingly framed with a pro-liberalisation bias.

The rich countries are portrayed as the villains, framed as responsible for ensuring the progress of the negotiations and for liberalising. Who this is to be done for is not entirely clear-cut, but partly for the sake of the poor, and partly for the sake of the WTO and the world trading system.

What is striking is how these different press trends seem to add up to one quite coherent meta-frame of the Doha Development Agenda, corresponding to the functional frame elements found in Entman's work on framing: the talks are about how trade barriers (especially in the agricultural sector) [problem definition] in the rich countries are causing harm in developing countries [causal analysis and moral evaluation] and the rich shall therefore bring development to the poor countries by means of liberalisation [treatment recommendation].

This is of course a very simplified picture of the press coverage of DDA talks, but it is a picture based on the aggregation of reliable, institutionalised trends in coverage. The reliability of the meta-frame hinges on whether one accepts that hundreds of different stories

from different contexts and points in time can be informed by an underlying current, here called a meta-frame, or whether one wishes to stick to that all elements we draw inferences from must be manifestly present in every news item. That said, many articles come quite close in their description of the DDA talks, as this New York Times article covering the launch of DDA negotiations which portrays the DDA as something akin to a development-friendly neo-liberalism - "an agenda that over the next three years could produce an invaluable array of market-opening reforms. The road map endorsed at a meeting in Doha, Qatar, points the way to freer trade in goods and services while promising to protect the interests of poor countries". (The New York Times, November 15, 2001).

To overcome doubts of whether the trends can be grouped together across news items and further investigate the meta-frame presented above, it could be investigated further using a more qualitative or discourse analytical approach. As touched upon above it is not clear that the meta-frame will be perfectly articulated in any single news item, but still a qualitative analysis might help gaining a clearer conception of the many different interpretations, value judgements and verbal constructions built into the contested concepts of development, liberalisation, the poor, and the rich.

It is interesting to note that the institutionalisation of one meta-frame appears to become firmer over the course of negotiations, suggesting maybe an emerging intellectual hegemony tightening its grip on the international press corps.

The overall conclusion on the high degree of institutionalisation in the press agenda puts weight to this meta-frame. Because when the meta-frame is institutionalised, it means that it will be sticky and difficult to alter. And when it is difficult to alter, the bias that will inevitably be built into the meta-frame will not only exert power during the time span of this analysis, but also some time after the conclusion of our observations, presumably until some critical juncture or external shock causes media images to seem out of date and in need of rethinking. The meta-frame will thus continue to be to the benefit of some WTO-actors and interests and to the disadvantage of others.

The intention behind sketching this meta-frame as an emerging intellectual hegemony is not to suggest that it is wrong, but merely to suggest that it is powerful. Needless to say, there will always be different opinions on the desirability of trade liberalisation and not the



least of its utility as a means to achieve development of poor countries. The point here is not to take a stand in this debate, but merely to note that a hegemonic meta-frame will have consequences. These could be seen as positive for the progress of WTO talks - if the emerging consensus is somehow necessary for the conclusion of negotiations, enabling the diverging national interests to come together under the common umbrella of development-friendly neo-liberalism. However, after yet another failure to conclude the Doha Round in the summer of 2008, the institutionalised international press agenda does not seem to have been a forceful factor conducive to agreement among important actors, although positions do seem to have moved a bit towards each other in the last couple of years. This does not exclude the possibility that, over a longer span of time, this development-friendly neo-liberalist press coverage might work to make the way for a deal.

On the other hand, the institutionalised meta-frame could also be seen as having a negative impact on the progression in the talks. In this view, the press agenda might be seen as all too powerful, locking the debate surrounding the trade talks - and maybe the talks themselves - into an intellectual path ridden by internal contradictions. Seen from a neo-liberal point of view, the media's naïve insistence on squaring the circle with a perfect balance between free trade and social development might serve to obstruct progress in negotiations by creating false expectations about trade liberalisation without losers.

#### POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES OF THE INSTITUTIONALISED META-FRAME

If one departs from the neo-liberal development frame described above, it then becomes possible to at least tentatively assert some ideas and interests that will have a difficulty in finding their place on the agenda. The framing that (agricultural) liberalization will alleviate the suffering of the poor is far from universally accepted but have critics in both developing and developed countries.

In the vast group of 'developing countries', many are dependent on the special benefits they enjoy as a result of preferential access to rich country markets. These people fear that their benefits will be eroded by WTO liberalization deals, and that no adequate compensation is in sight. Many of the poorest countries face constraints such as lack of infrastructure and capital, which inhibit exportations, make transition in the econ-

omy difficult, and thus make it difficult for them to reap any benefits from lowered trade barriers. This dissatisfaction with the focus on agricultural liberalization as the key to development is widespread. As one article put it in the coverage of the Hong Kong summit: "It sort of says it all when you need a development package to get developing countries to agree to a development round"<sup>13</sup> Thus, even in the group of countries that stand to benefit according to the press meta-frame, opinions on the merits of this narrative are not uniform. Likewise, the focus on liberalization as a development tool exhibited in this analysis might reflect the selection of countries for the analysis as much as it reflects the actual views out there. The G20 countries, which are the only developing countries featured in this analysis, are exactly the countries that have the capital, infrastructure and economic punch to be able to gain from liberalization. Conducting further analysis on the press coverage in some of the least developed countries might qualify this picture of liberalization as a development tool.

A study performed by the international NGO network Panos concludes that journalists and the news outlets in selected Southeast Asian and African countries are often highly under-resourced and thus often highly influenced by the coverage of big international newspapers and news wires (Panos, 2006: 3ff). This seems to suggest that the political bias found in the press coverage in this study might also apply evenly to press coverage in poorer countries.

But clearly, more research is needed in order to establish whether poorer countries tend to be more critical towards trade liberalisation or to adopt coverage patterns found in major countries press.

In developed countries, there is also opposition to the notion that the rich countries have to provide the lion's share of liberalization and ensure a successful outcome of trade talks. Clearly, protectionist lobby groups, especially in the heavily protected farm sector, can be expected to face difficulties altering the focus of the press agenda on (agricultural) liberalization by the rich to achieve development for the poor. But even among WTO diplomats from countries traditionally seen as development friendly, the focus on the value laden concept of

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<sup>13</sup> Lori Wallach, trade director of the Washington-based NGO Public Citizen. Quoted in *New York Times*, December 15. 2005.

development and the emphasis on rich country responsibility for achieving it create frustrations:

"I have problems with the word development in Doha Development Round as it creates a false impression of what the negotiations are about. It puts an extra pressure on the negotiations. Everyone has their own ideas about what is, and how to pursue development."<sup>14</sup>

This quote also emphasises that the press agenda may have an impact on not only actors seeking access to the press agenda but on the overall dynamics found in negotiations. Regrettably, the analytical design employed in this study does not make it possible to say much about the agenda-setting relationship between the media agenda, the public agenda, and the political agenda. But surely, further research could explore the agenda-setting effects of news on international trade politics, perhaps using a case-based and interview based approach.

But even with the many shortcomings this study is still able to assert that the sticky nature of the political bias built into the press coverage will likely have real consequences in influencing whose views can get access to the media. And this will likely benefit or disadvantage actors within both groups of developing and developed countries. And maybe, the political bias of the institutionalised meta-frame will even affect the dynamics of the ongoing negotiations in the WTO.

#### IS INSTITUTIONALISATION A GENERAL TREND?

##### THE CASE OF CLIMATE CHANGE NEWS COVERAGE

The findings of this investigation might also have implications beyond the DDA negotiations, giving an idea of what to expect when looking at the press coverage of similar negotiation processes. This final section will deal with this question, exploring when and how the findings of this study can be used in other contexts, and tentatively indicating which consequences the mechanisms found will have in another setting.

The first question to be answered is when one can expect similar structures in press coverage of international negotiations, and thus when one can expect media coverage to become institutionalised across time and space. Institutionalisation, as spelled out earlier, is the key finding of this study since it structures what will be represented in the media and what will not. Institution-

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<sup>14</sup> Interview, Dutch WTO-official

alisation thus lays the foundation for the news media to potentially have important consequences for negotiations. For a negotiation process to be similar to the WTO's Doha negotiations, it needs to fulfil a number of requirements: it would have to include a large number of participants, intensifying the competition for media attention among negotiators. It would have to deal with subjects that are deemed interesting by a not insignificant share of domestic news consumers, in order to be able to sustain press attention over a long period of time, as has the Doha Round.

It would have to deal with what is in the lingo of media studies called an 'un-obtrusive' issue, i.e. an issue that does not have direct consequences experienced by a wide range of society, and with which the normal news consumer thus does not have personal experience. This condition means that the news consumer has to rely on mediated accounts to know what the issue is about, what it does and does not encompass, how causal relations within the issue works, and how problems within the issue can or cannot be resolved. Also, lack of unobtrusiveness would, at least presumably, lead to more local diversity in news coverage, and thus inhibit the institutionalisation of certain features of coverage.

Furthermore there must, as stressed above, be a certain degree of uncertainty or even controversy about how causal and moral relationships work within the issue, making journalists look over the shoulder of their colleagues or predecessors to see how other journalists interpret events and attribute significance to some developments and not to other.

In total these conditions mean that for a negotiation process to be structurally similar to the Doha Round negotiations, it has to be characterised by a large number of actors negotiating a subject that is deemed interesting by a broad public, but at the same time is remote from people's everyday experiences and therefore characterised by a large degree of uncertainty about causal mechanisms, problems and their possible solutions.

These conditions enables the press to act as an effective pseudo-environment (Lippmann, 1922), establishing the 'facts' that people use to judge actors' performance, to interpret events happening in and around the negotiations, and even to judge the desirability of a possible agreement.

When the conditions above are fulfilled, it makes it more likely that an institutionalised international press agenda will function as a common standard of evaluation, and thus possibly that an institutionalised meta-frame will emerge.

Such a common standard of evaluation will again pave the way for negotiators to become influenced by the press agenda by trying to structure negotiations such in a way that gives themselves and their country a heroic role in the press fairy-tale where important negotiations are spoiled by evil villains not caring for the poor victims. The conditions outlined above are met by a great deal of prolonged international negotiation processes but certainly not by all. Intuitively, the hard test seems to be the ability to sustain press attention for a considerable time. Contemporary examples of negotiations that does sustain considerable attention for a prolonged time could include global climate talks, the EU Lisbon treaty negotiations, the FTAA/ALCA free trade negotiations and to a lesser degree the EU-ACP trade talks aimed at establishing Economic Partnership Agreements, the Oslo process aimed at prohibiting cluster bombs, as well as the more public parts of UN negotiations, such as negotiations on possible sanctions against dictatorships or possible violators of the non-proliferation treaty on atomic weapons. The lessons learned from this study can in principle be adapted to any of these mediated multilateral negotiations, although the exact results will of course vary according to the specifics of the subject at hand.

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