



Framing the Tunnel
Local News Media and the
Hallandsås Toxic Leak 1997

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Preface

Framing the Tunnel. Local News Media and the Hallandsås Toxic Leak 1997 is the 27th number in a series of working paper from the Centre for Public Sector Research at Göteborg University. The report has been prepared as part of the research programme *Understanding Siting Controversy: the Case of the West Coast Line Railway*.

Göteborg, December 2000

Lennart Nilsson
Director

Abstract

How does a local newspaper cover a major environmental crisis in the local community? What kind of issues or stories do journalists construe from such events? This report examines the news stories about a toxic leak, which occurred during the construction of an already highly controversial railway tunnel in southern Sweden in October 1997. The analysis covers the first four weeks of local news coverage following the discovery of the contamination.

Using combined techniques for text analysis, the study deals both with quantitative and qualitative aspects of news coverage. Theoretically the study employs the concept of *news frames*, the specific conception or problem definition that the news media emphasize when reporting on an event. Previous research has delineated four primary news frames: 'economic', 'human impact', 'conflict' and 'responsibility' frames. This analysis shows that although all four frames are present, some are much more prevalent than others. A clear picture of guilt and responsibility emerge in the newspaper reporting about the tunnel incident, whereas the conflicts between the actors involved are not predominant. The political controversy over the issue is less visible while the individuals suffering from the wrongdoings of the construction company and the Rail Administration are brought to the fore. The analysis also finds that local journalism is characterized to a large degree by a factual, informative style.

Introduction

In October 1997, Sweden was shaken by the news of a toxic leak at the Hallandsås ridge in the southwestern corner of the country. During the construction of a railway tunnel through the ridge, a toxic chemical used for sealing the tunnel walls had leaked into ground water and streams nearby. Numerous people were directly affected by the toxic leak. Among them were farmers residing in the vicinity whose cattle were poisoned, and construction workers, who showed symptoms of illness related to the toxin. The event developed into a major environmental scandal involving top players in the political establishment, the National Rail Administration, and the Ministries of Environment and Communication, among others. The tunnel in question belongs to a large-scale railway project in Sweden, the West Coast Rail, which already before the toxic incident in 1997 had been questioned for the greatly exceeded budget as well as for environmental reasons.

Most people in the vicinity of the tunnel were informed about the toxic leak via the media (Arvidson 1998). The news media is by far the most important source of information about public events for most people (Asp 1986; Chaffee & Mutz 1988). Some studies suggest, however, that the media is of less importance as an information source in issues of local character, as in the case of the tunnel incident (Palmgreen & Clarke 1977). Although there is a seemingly everlasting debate on whether and how media has an effect on its audiences, it is fairly uncontroversial to suggest that the way the news media portray public events is of importance for public knowledge and opinion.

One tradition of research departs from the notion that people use conceptual 'schema' or 'shortcuts' to make sense of the great information flows they are exposed to. Media may have effects on the public opinion to the extent they can influence these conceptual shortcuts or 'frames of reference' that the individuals use when interpreting information about public events (Scheufele 1999; Mutz, Sniderman & Brody 1996; Popkin 1994).

In our society media has a duty to fulfil in providing and channelling information. This duty is as important as ever when a serious incident such as the Hallandsås toxic leak is concerned. Here I will focus on the local news media and their coverage of the tunnel incident with respect to the framing of the particular news stories.¹ Finding out

¹ This report has been prepared as part of the research programme *Understanding Siting Controversy: the Case of the West Coast Line Railway*. The project has been carried out at CEFOS (Centre for Public Sector Research) at Göteborg University. Funding has been provided by generous grants from Kommunikationsforskningsberedningen (Swedish Transport and Communications Research Board) and Banverket (National Rail Administration). Other publications emanating from the project include Å. Boholm (ed.) *National Objectives, Local Objections: Railroad Modernization in Sweden*. Göteborg: Cefos, 2000; R. Löfstedt & Å. Boholm "Off Track in Sweden," *Environment* 41 (4) May 1999: 16-20, 40-43; Å. Boholm, R. Löfstedt, & U. Strandberg *Tunnelbygget genom Hallandsås: Lokalsamhällets dilemma*, Göteborg: CEFOS

what frames the media use can provide the basis for further inquiries into the relation between media frames and how the public conceive the same issues.²

The Aim of the Study

In this report I present a scheme of analysis for the study of news media coverage on the basis of previous research on news frames. This scheme of analysis is applied to news articles from a local newspaper's coverage of the events in the immediate aftermath of the tunnel incident. The aim is to find out whether the proposed frames categories can help describe the coverage in a pertinent manner. Another objective is to further develop an analytical model for the inquiry into news framing. A later question, which will not be discussed in this context, is whether news frames and the public's accounts of the same events coincide.

News Frames

Frames, and framing, may refer to a number of phenomena. The roots of these concepts are to be found in several academic disciplines, most notably in sociology or anthropology (Goffman 1974; Gamson 1992; see also Graber 1984; Iyengar 1991). The concept is sometimes used interchangeably with 'schema' or even the looser concept of 'perspective' to denote a systematic sampling and ordering of information. Entman's (1993:52) definition of framing points to the possible effects framing may have, and thus to the wide significance of framing theory:

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating context, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.

An important distinction is between the frames *individuals* use to sort information, and the frames that *media* use to portray different events or phenomena (Scheufele 1999). The relation between the two has been studied, usually in experimental settings, in order better to understand communications effects. In the field of political communication, news frames have been used as an analytical tool for assessing how public opinion is formed. Iyengar (1991) uses the concept of frames to distinguish news

Report 12, 1998 (in Swedish).

The author wishes to thank Kent Asp, Åsa Boholm, Marcia Grimes and Urban Strandberg for valuable advice and comments on the text.

² For analyses on the media discourse in relation to risk and disasters, see Singer & Endreny (1993); Stallings (1990).

stories that have an episodic or a thematic approach to the covered issues. Episodic frames are characterised by news being viewed as single instances independent of each other and of a broader context. A thematic news frame on the other hand has its focus on a larger issue complex of which single events figure as examples.

An oft-cited work on news framing is Neuman, Just & Crigler (1992): *Common Knowledge: News and the Construction of Political Meaning*. The authors start with the way a sample of Americans discuss a number of societal issues (i.e. defence policy, AIDS, apartheid in South Africa). Neuman et al identify five conceptual frames that the news audiences use to make sense of the political news flow:

- The economic frame, where costs and benefits in financial terms are in the foreground.
- The human impact frame, in which individuals or groups who are affected by a certain issue appear as illustrations to the issue in question. The frame puts a 'human face' on a story by providing examples of this kind.
- The conflict frame, in which two sides of an issue are presented as two conflicting groups or individuals. The issue is presented as a battle between the two, 'us' and 'them', or 'winner' and 'loser'.
- The powerlessness frame, where the locus of control of an issue is out of sight, in the hands of "powerful others" or simply not possible to identify.
- The morality frame, with a focus on judgments of 'right' and 'wrong', and other morally based praise and condemnation.

Although a great number of news frames are conceivable, the ones proposed by Neuman et al have the advantage of being salient both in individuals' accounts on a number of issues, and in news reporting. It can be claimed that the news frames are universal in the sense that they are not limited to specific audiences, societies or media.

In the analysis I will make use of the categories of frames that Neuman et al (1992) identify, although with some modifications. In the Neuman et al study, the morality frame turned out to be applicable to individuals reasoning, but had only little relevance to the media discourse (Neuman et al 1992: 72-73). Therefore it has not been further considered in the present analysis. Furthermore, building on Valkenberg et al (1999), I propose a responsibility frame to replace the powerlessness frame. The responsibility frame refers to stories where responsibility for actions or events is attributed. Thus it is more fruitful, since it incorporates both attribution of responsibility and the non-attribution intrinsic to Neuman's et al concept of powerlessness. The operational definitions of the particular news frames are found in each section of the analysis below.

Local media may emphasise different frames than national media. One might expect, for example, that the conflict frame is less prominent. The relation between local news media and the community is typically characterised by a high degree of consensus (cf Larsson 1998).

The Hallandsås Tunnel Incident 1997

The railway tunnel in question is part of the West Coast Railroad, a large-scale reconstruction project of railroads in South and Western Sweden. The West Coast Railroad, in turn, was launched in the beginning of the 1990s as part of a larger infrastructure venture. Its main purpose was to meet the needs for improved trade links between the Scandinavian countries and continental Europe (Boholm 2000; Tunnel Commission 1998). As part of the West Coast Railroad project the National Rail Administration was assigned the task to build a railway tunnel through the Hallandsås Ridge, near the small town of Båstad. Already from the start in 1993 the project encountered severe difficulties. The original plan to use a gigantic drill for the construction of the tunnel had to be abandoned because of the poor quality of the bedrock. The project was seriously delayed and the costs went up dramatically. Moreover, an unexpected drain of ground water occurred during the work, which led the entrepreneur to inject large amounts of a chemical sealing agent into the cracks of the tunnel wall.

In early October 1997 suspicions were raised against the tunnel project as cattle grazing near the ridge showed symptoms of balance disorders and paralysis. The cattle had to be destroyed, and test samples taken from the remains contained the neurotoxin acrylamide, a component of the sealant used in the tunnel. The same chemical substance was also discovered in wells used for drinking water in the area. The reports of the dead livestock and of dead fish in a nearby stream triggered substantive news coverage. National newspapers, radio and television very soon followed the local news media, which broke the news. The tunnel leak was to be the biggest environmental scandal in Sweden for two decades. The construction of the railway was immediately halted awaiting legal procedures and a decision by the government on whether to continue building at considerably higher costs. In the time of writing no final decision has been taken on the future of the project.

Study Design

In order to answer the questions about local media coverage of the Hallandsås Tunnel incident, the dominating local newspaper in the town of Båstad (Nordvästra Skånes Tidningar, NST) was chosen. NST covers two-thirds of the households of Båstad, a small town of approximately 14,000 inhabitants (TS-boken 1999).

The study sample takes as point of departure the first media coverage of the incident of toxic leakage first reported on 2 October 1997, and extends over a period of four weeks.³ All articles concerning the Hallandsås tunnel published during that

³ In this report the material is limited to the first four weeks of coverage beginning 2/10/1997, ending

period were included. The sample includes leading articles, news articles and short news items, but excludes letters to the editor.

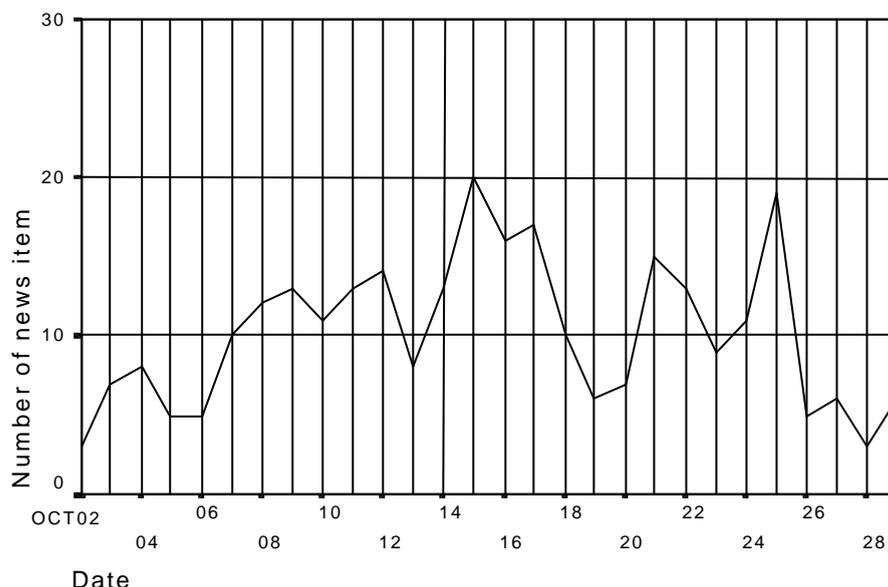
For each article the question is posed whether the story can be characterised as belonging to the economic frame, the human impact frame, the conflict frame, and the responsibility frame, respectively. The news frames are not necessarily mutually exclusive. One single article may therefore contain several frames.⁴ The analysis was done combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, taking into account both the frequency with which the frames occurred, and the typical qualities of the same. The main focus in this paper however is on the more qualitative aspects of the material.

Local Newspaper Coverage of the Toxic Leak Incident

First, a brief quantitative account of the study is presented. This is done to give an overview of the news coverage of the tunnel incident in NST, before entering into the part where the news report is analysed according to the frames categories discussed above.

During the first four weeks of the coverage, the NST produced a total of 285 news articles on the Hallandsås incident. In quantitative terms, the coverage reached its peak about two weeks from the day the first articles were published (see figure 1).

Figure 1 NST coverage of the Hallandsås Toxic Incident 1997.
Number of news articles per day



29/10/1997. A total number of 285 news articles were analysed.

⁴ Around one out of ten articles turned out to present more than one of the proposed news frames.

The figures in the diagram refer to the number of articles concerning the tunnel incident. Thus, it gives no proper measure of the intensity of the reporting. Rather, the increasing number of articles published reflects a diversification of reporting. For natural reasons the articles from the first few days focused on the immediate events at the tunnel. As the first shock subsided other perspectives were brought into the news report, resulting in more articles of various kinds: commentary, short paragraphs, and items from news agencies.

Although no particular attention is paid to the way newspaper coverage develops over time, we may nevertheless give a brief overview of the emphasis of particular news frames categories for each of the four studied weeks. As a news story develops, different frames could be put forth at different periods of time, at different stages in the life cycle of a news story. Table 1 shows the distribution of the news frames by week of publication.

Table 1 Types of news frames in NST report by period of publication (presence in percent of all news articles)

Frame	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	All
Economic	10	9	19	8	12
Human Impact	14	12	16	10	13
Conflict	16	18	11	14	15
Responsibility	34	29	12	18	22
N=	50	92	84	59	285

NB Categories are not mutually exclusive, therefore no percentage sum.
 "Week 1" commencing 2/10/1997 etc.

Already from the first days of reporting the incident, the responsibility for what had happened was in focus. The economic frame, concerning the costs of the incident or the project as such, was also present in the early report. More news stories of that kind were published at a later point in time, when a few investigative articles about the companies involved occurred. Comparatively fewer articles brought up the responsibility issue in the articles published in week three and four. Conflict and human impact stories were more equally distributed over the four-week period that the study covers.

Below, I will present the findings from the analysis of the NST coverage. The plan of this section follows the scheme of analysis outlined above, starting with the economic frame.

"It's All a Waste of Money" (The Economic Frame)

We may readily assume that economic consequences provide for a common frame in news reporting – most political issues may for example be seen from a financial point of view. This is clearly the case also with the Hallandsås tunnel. The project as a whole is a major industrial task with a billion-dollar budget. The environmental consequences of the toxic leak may also produce debate on costs. However, because of the dramatic nature of the event, we should not expect a great emphasis on the economic aspects of this case.

Here I define the economic frame as a story in which considerations of the (actual, perceived, or future) economic consequences of the tunnel construction and/ or the toxic leak are in the foreground (see Neuman et al 1992; Valkenberg et al 1999). As 'economic' count not only references to the expenses involved, but also to delays in the project, and to the possible gains or losses in travel time that are discussed in connection to the railway project. However, economic consequences for individuals are not considered in this category. Instead stories of that kind will instead be taken as instances of the *human impact* frame (see below).

Most of the NST articles with a distinct economic perspective refer to the costs related to the two main alternatives for the project: to continue building the tunnel with new methods, or to abandon it completely. The implicit message in these stories is that either option will impose enormous costs compared to the original budget. Under the headline "Taxpayers Must Pay" the preamble of the article summarises the content:

The tunnel project through the Hallandsås will not be finished in time. Skanska and the National Rail Administration have no chance, neither to complete the construction by the end of 1999, nor to remain within the budget, which is now estimated at 2.8 billion SEK – three times the original budget. ⁵

To a lesser extent, the economic frame also concerned the cleaning-up costs related to the toxic leak:

The West Coast Railway south of [the city of] Helsingborg will be delayed - the question is only for how long? Moreover, the removal of the excavated material is believed to cost the National Rail Administration between 20 and 30 million SEK. The large-scale project for the Göteborg - Malmö line thus receives yet another blow. Besides having to remove at least 24000 tonnes of excavation material [used for the rail embankments], it must also be replaced by other material.

NST was unable to reach anyone in a position of authority at the National Rail Administration who could comment on what his means in terms of delay and the financing of the project. /.../ The National Rail Administration

⁵ NST 8/10/1997. 1 Krona (SEK) app. = 0.10 USD / Euro 0.12.

*has two options: either to remove the material immediately, or to fight [the decision].*⁶

In the later part of the studied period of NST coverage, more economic frame articles were published with a focus on claims for damages. Most of the claims were made on behalf of those directly affected by the toxic leak. There were also stories covering the concerns by farmers' organisations in the region of Skåne. They feared that their products would be impossible to trade since the tunnel incident had given the whole region a bad name.

A few investigative articles could also be categorised within the economic frame, among them a story about the manufacturer of the toxic sealant, French transnational corporation *Rhône-Poulenc*. On the whole, however, the economic accounts of the incident were few and subordinate - around 12 percent of all news stories presented news within an economic frame. In NST:s report the Hallandsås incident was clearly not an economic issue.

Dead Cows Inquiry? (The Human Impact Frame)

The typical human impact news story is an illustration of a larger, abstract phenomenon by means of a specimen, or exemplar, of the same. This is to a high degree consistent with media logic (cf Altheide & Snow 1979), in which personalisation of news report plays an important role (cf Eide & Hernes 1987). Experimental research has also shown that stories using exemplars are effective since they are more easily remembered than stories with abstract or logical reasoning. They "*tend to form judgements on the basis of vividness instead of validity*" (Brosius & Bathelt 1994).

An article is considered belonging to the human impact frame when a particular individual, family or group of people is brought forward as an illustration of a wider issue. In the present study, the stories of the people who have in some way been affected by the toxic leak serve as exemplars of the issue (the tunnel incident).

Already during the first couple of days of coverage, the human impact frame was applied in NST journalism. The factual basis for the first few articles was the discovery of the dying cattle and the dead fish near the tunnel construction site. It may be argued that the first news articles that assumed this perspective did not tell the story of *human* impact, as much as that of cows, sheep or fish (see Asp 1998). However, the news articles describing the dramatic consequences for animal life above all emphasised the worries of the people living near the tunnel.

In their comparison between media frames and individual frames, Neuman, Just & Crigler (1992) found that the human impact news stories were more neutral and dispassionate than the discussions people had over the same subjects. When reasoning in terms of human impact people tended to use more moral arguments and emotional

⁶ NST 21/10/1997.

accounts. In a sense the human impact stories in the tunnel incident coverage were neutral in style. Some articles just give us the facts about what has happened. Such accounts may state that a well has been drained, or that possibly toxic water is being led into the nearby stream, or the like. Together with these factual accounts the stories express the general anxiety and concern of the affected individuals. However, NST coverage of the tunnel incident also provides a few examples of a more victimising, and/or compassionate human impact story. A couple of articles tell stories about the tragedy of people who had already been misfortunate in the past, and who had now become victims of the tunnel project. The first one concerns a man who manages a fish breeding facility, which draws water from the contaminated stream near the ridge:

Bo Troedsson lives at Vysteberg, a farm just south of Grevie [village]. For many years he ran a farm with all that this involves. But in the early 1980s Bo was stricken by a mysterious illness, probably caused by a tick bite. He spent half a year in an intensive care unit. 'The respirator was my lifeline. Were it not for it, I would have ded', says Bo, who still suffers from complications of the disease.

/.../

*Two weeks ago, Bo realised that something wasn't right. There was foam on the surface of the water and the fish died. /.../ Bo can do nothing but watch as his life-time achievement is ruined little by little. There is nothing that can be done to save his fish culture. 'In my situation you cannot take any big setbacks, you'll loose your spark of life. The fish culture was my space to breathe.'*⁷

A similar story departs from another farmer's misfortune:

*Five years ago, Gunnar's house was burnt to the ground. When it has finally been rebuilt, a new shocking event: the drinking water is poisoned.*⁸

A common trait in almost all of the human impact frame stories is that they do not point out anyone responsible for what has happened. The purpose of the human impact stories is not to provide a channel for expressing blame, but rather to evoke general sympathy for the ones affected by the incident.

It turned out to be just as common to apply a human impact frame as to use the economic frame. In total, 13 percent of the stories focused on affected individuals. Whether this is a high number is hard to say. There is clearly a limit to how much the human impact frame can be used. The stories will eventually become very similar, and not add much to the coverage of the events. The 'newsworthiness' of a human impact story depends partly on the possibilities to visualise it. It is easier to create a story of human impact when the impact is visible, and, preferably shocking or upsetting. Visual images in news are effective in conveying emotional meaning (Boholm 1998:127; Ferreira et al 2000; Graber 1996:90).

⁷ NST 3/10/1997.

⁸ NST 22/10/1997.

In this respect the tunnel incident is a hard event to visualise, the exception being the dead cows and fish. Most consequences of the toxic leak are possible or future effects. In the long run, acrylamide may cause cancer or neural diseases in humans, or harm wildlife and agriculture in the area. At the time the news broke, the consequences were far from known, let alone visible.

The workers at the tunnel site constitute another possible source for human impact stories. Although not visible in the sense discussed above, the cases of work related illness discovered among them would nevertheless provide for typical victim reports in the press. The reluctance on the part of the workers to "go public" and talk about their problems may however have held back the use of the human impact news frame. The first accounts of injuries among workers were anonymous. Only one out of six human impact stories featured tunnel workers, although the handling of the toxic sealant must be regarded as a major work environment problem.

Farmers' Outrage (The Conflict Frame)

The first few days of news coverage of the incident were of mere informative character. Only few sources were used, most notably the affected people near the tunnel site, and the Båstad town officials. None of the accusations made in the beginning of the coverage were directly matched with replies from the accused. The first occasion the NST brought in a conflict news frame was three days after the first breaking news.

Tunnel Toxin Reported to the Police /headline/

*The municipal government of Båstad and Bo Wendt [head of environmental board] have lost patience with Skanska and the National Rail Administration. They have reported them both to the police, together with the retailer of the sealant Rhoca-Gil, Rhône-Poulenc Sverige AB./.../
Skanska's project leader Per Mared was surprised that leading politicians in Båstad have decided to bring criminal charges against the Rail Administration, Skanska and Rhône-Poulenc: 'I had not expected this. It feels hard, but there is not much we can do at the moment. I believe that we have handled the product in a correct way'./...⁹*

Apparently the 'conflict' in these stories is quite tame and low key. The accused play a modest and defensive role. Another, more atypical conflict took place on a more popular level. The following story describes an occasion in which Båstad farmers engaged in a spontaneous protest against the tunnel builders. Mounted on tractors the farmers initiated a blockade against the dumping of toxic material near their grounds.

⁹ NST 05/10/1997.

Farmers Win First Battle /headline/

Never annoy a farmer from Skåne! Revenge comes quickly, hard and without mercy. That is what the National Rail Administration experienced Sunday, when they tried to dump possibly toxic excavation material outside Förslöv.

/.../

[trailer driver]: 'We are to turn back. We have received orders to return.'

[journalist]: 'And dump the waste at Örby Ängar [the protected area] again?'

He shrugs his shoulders. The farmers are cheering. They have won one of the battles against the giant, and feel the scent of victory for the entire war.¹⁰

The explicit war metaphors were anomalous to the matter-of-fact style journalism that distinguished the NST articles. The direct, almost physical clash between farmers on their tractors and the trailers sent by the National Rail Administration was also unusual to the reporting. It appeared to be a spontaneous protest by farmers upon discovering that toxic excavated soil from the tunnel site was being moved to a site close to their lands. Notably, the official representative of the National Rail Administration, who was also quoted in the article, did not comment on the farmers' action that forced the National Rail Administration to change their plans.

The conflict in this case, thus, was set on the grassroots level. Most of the articles where official representatives (local government, National Rail Administration, Skanska) were quoted, were not framed as conflicts. Instead, each individual or representative acting as a news source was allowed to make their statements without relating them to previous statements by others. Thus the comments on the tunnel incident were rather a series of independent statements than a conflict, or even for that matter, a dialogue.

Table 2 shows the most common opposing parties in the news report.

Table 2. Five most common conflict types in NST coverage (percentage of all conflict accounts, N=42)

Conflict type	Percent
local authorities vs National Rail Administration/Skanska	24
individuals vs National Rail Administration/Skanska	19
political parties conflict (national)	14
individuals vs local authorities	7
journalists/media vs local authorities	7

A large number of those articles that portrayed conflicts between different actors involved the National Rail Administration and/ or Skanska.

When national political players were involved, the conflict frame was more salient. This conflict was set within the pattern of traditional party politics. Typically these

¹⁰ NST 13/10/1997.

articles involved opposition charges against the government for not having taken enough or proper measures to prevent the tunnel incident.

Blaming the Builders (The Responsibility Frame)

A news report falls within the responsibility frame when somebody is attributed with having caused the toxic leak, or being pointed out as responsible for solving the problem.

The responsibility frame was more prominent in the coverage than the previously discussed ones. Some 22 percent of all articles contained clear attributions of responsibility for the events leading to the toxic leak.

If we look into the question of who was made responsible for the events, the NST gave the reader a quite clear and unambiguous answer: the National Rail Administration and to some degree Skanska were singled out as the culpable parties in the tunnel affair (table 3).

Table 3. Attribution of responsibility for the Hallandsås Tunnel Incident in percentage of all accounts of responsibility (N=76)

Responsibility attributed...	Percent
National Rail Administration	47
Skanska	21
<i>Rhône-Poulenc</i>	20
Government/ Central Administration	6
Local Authorities	1
Other	3
Sum (percent)	100

The National Rail Administration featured in nearly half of the instances of journalistic attribution of guilt for the tunnel incident. The construction entrepreneur Skanska and the sealant producer Rhône-Poulenc were also portrayed as responsible for the incident, although to a lesser degree. The political actors and in particular local politicians receive only occasional criticism for being among the responsible.

Skanska was aware of the alarming levels of toxic substances in the streams several days before it was made public. In so doing they obstructed the actions of the municipality, says a highly critical environmental board chairman, Bo Wendt./.../

I strongly suspect that Skanska was hoping to bring about a second test, when the toxin had subsided. Outrageous! says Bo Wendt.¹¹

¹¹ NST 11/10 1997.

Especially hard is the judgement of the National Rail Administration, which received nearly half of all attributions of responsibility, either alone or together with others. The accused parties did little to reject the accusations when given the chance. On the contrary, they at least to some extent acknowledged guilt for the events whenever they appeared in the news articles. These circumstances certainly helped to make the responsibility frame a powerful way of thinking about the tunnel incident.

As the days and weeks passed the picture became somewhat more varied. When it was discovered that tunnel workers had health problems related to the chemical sealant used, the blame was also put on the manufacturer. Still, most of the blame was put on the immediate actors in the tunnel incident: the builders Skanska, and the responsible authority, the National Rail Administration.

An article featuring criticism from a group of experts in industrial health may however illustrate a different account of blame. The experts commented on the tunnel workers and criticised the government for granting less money to industrial health care and for having neglected work environment issues.¹²

Researchers Not Surprised By Disaster /headline/

Government grants have been reduced from the industrial health care, and there is less concern with chemical health risks. This view has been adopted quickly by the companies, writes three researchers. /.../ According to them, the toxic scandal at Hallandsås was only to be expected. Similar disasters happen on a smaller scale in many workplaces around Sweden. In the opinion of the researchers the disasters are consequences of the changing attitude in society.

This article was exceptional to the news stories in at least two respects. First, it pointed out that the national government was in some way responsible for the events at Hallandsås. Neither the government (i.e. the cabinet) nor politicians in general played prominent roles as wrongdoers in the press. Although the national political actors (parties, cabinet ministers, parliamentarians) were portrayed as involved in conflict over the tunnel incident (table 2), the news stories seldom implied guilt for the events. Second, the above quote is one of the rare examples of reporting that saw the tunnel incident as a broader, political problem. Only a very small number of the stories brought in that perspective.

The actors on the local political scene escaped from the events almost unhurt. For example there is only one instance - out of the nearly three hundred articles - where the municipality is put in a defensive position, having to answer for actions taken before the toxic scandal broke.¹³ That particular case seems to have been source-initiated as it builds on a property owner's question why the municipality agreed to let the tunnel entrepreneurs dump waste from the tunnel near his property.

¹² NST 12/10/1997.

¹³ 'Is Stensån also poisoned?' NST 12/10/1997.

The Most Common Report: The Information Frame

In this report the primary task is to determine if (and to what extent) the events at the Hallandsås can be described in terms of the four news frames. No claim is made that the four frames are comprehensive. However, the results show that the four proposed frames only account for around half of the published articles. Most of the articles that did not fit into any of the categories of frames discussed above have nevertheless one thing in common. They are simple, down to earth in their language, informative in tone rather than narrative, and clearly written for the information of the inhabitants of the community. Characteristic elements of these reports are quotes of official sources, and facts aimed at clarifying conditions that concern people. Typical sources are local authorities or experts involved in the analysis of the water quality or the like:

"Safe to drink tap water"/headline/

According to the Environmental Office it is now safe to use the public water in Båstad. As a precaution however, the water supply at Krogstorp will be banned until further notice.

The Environmental office in Båstad has lately received numerous phone calls by worried people. The office has therefore received reinforcements from other offices to be able to answer all questions.

Most people wanted to know whether it is safe to drink water from the wells at Hallandsås. They received the following answers: The Vadbäcken [stream] should neither be used as drinking water for humans nor animals/.../At the time being it is safe to drink water from public supplies.¹⁴

To provide factual information about public events is a major part of the journalist's mission (McQuail 1994). When the well-being and health of the public is immediately endangered such as in the Hallandsås case, the information task is particularly crucial. News 'stories' of this kind imply no particular frame, out of the four news frames previously discussed. However I do not suggest that this is to be regarded as a "bottom line" journalism which is "neutral" in character, and thus devoid of everything in the way of frames or perspectives. Tentatively I would suggest that these news articles constitute an *information* frame, in its own right.¹⁵ This frame draws attention to the factual aspects of the issue (What happened? Where? What is to be done?), but suggests neither causal interpretation nor explanation of the phenomena described in the articles.

¹⁴ NST 04/10/1997.

¹⁵ This label should not be taken as an evaluation; that this type of article is necessarily is more informative or useful for the reader than other articles.

Preliminary Conclusions and Discussion

A few - preliminary - conclusions could be made about the NST news coverage of the Hallandsås incident.

It is probably an unusual thing to portray the local authorities as the heroes of the play, as political scandals are concerned. In the Hallandsås case one might argue that the local politicians and administration have been given that role. Only one single news article suggested that the local authorities had any responsibility for the events. Although the local authorities indirectly received criticism in a couple of other stories, the general picture is that the responsibility frame was quite unambiguous when deployed: the villains were the National Railway Administration and the entrepreneur Skanska.

The low level of criticism of politicians in general and of local ones in particular may have several reasons. The most obvious would be that they had in fact done nothing wrong, and that the full blame was justly put elsewhere. This is naturally not the place to assess to what degree politicians and other actors deserved blame or not. Another explanation is that the local authorities from an early stage grasped the initiative in the events, and clearly expressed their view on where responsibility lay. Already on the third day after the first discovery of toxic water, the Municipality brought in criminal charges against the National Rail Administration and Skanska for violating the Environmental Code, and against *Rhône-Poulenc* for breaking the regulations concerning toxic products. The alleged parties in turn helped create a clear picture of guilt, since both the National Rail Administration and Skanska assumed responsibility for what had happened. This fact may have turned the edge of some more blame-oriented journalism.

In this connection there is good reason to stress a particular feature of the Swedish public administrative system. The separation of power between the cabinet ministers and the independent administrative bodies, such as the National Rail Administration, certainly affects how we look upon responsibility. Cabinet ministers assume a general responsibility for policy, but they are not liable for the exercise of authority in particular cases. Thus no member of the cabinet is expected to interfere directly in the case of the Hallandsås incident. The executives of the independent administration are therefore more likely to be held responsible for various administrative measures than are the politicians.

Another explanation for why politicians are not blamed to any great extent may lie in the fact that the news reports almost exclusively deal with the incident as a single occurrence, and not as part of a broader, structurally determined event. In Iyengar's (1991) terms, the coverage was more of an episodic character than a thematic one. Admittedly, one would expect the coverage to centre on the more immediate causes and consequences. However the incident as such provides material for a more general

deliberation of the pros and cons of the West Coast Rail project as a whole, and of the political decisions behind it.

The consensus between municipal authorities and the newspaper may also be attributed to a common feature in local news production: 'the home town for better or for worse' (Larsson 1998:132). The Hallandsås case can be described as an instance of "us" against "them" in the sense that the evils of the tunnel project are imposed from outsiders: the national government and its agencies, as well as big business in the form of entrepreneur Skanska and the French chemical giant *Rhône-Poulenc*. There are few if any accounts of the local government's role in and handling of the project before the toxic leak occurred.

One may also describe the event by what it was not being seen as: an accident. The lack of responsibility accounts in the majority of the articles of NST should not be taken as a proof that the newspaper conveyed a picture of the incident as haphazard, and that nothing could have been done to prevent it. On the contrary, the general account was that recklessness and bad decision-making particularly on the part of the National Rail Administration and Skanska had caused the toxic leak. In the NST news report, the Hallandsås tunnel incident was an instance of environmental crime, and definitely not an accident.

The conflict frame is not a particularly salient feature in the news coverage of the Hallandsås incident. One may want to search for explanations for this finding in the specific traits of local journalism (Larsson 1998; Gieber & Johnson 1961). Another reason for the low level of conflict in the coverage may be that it is hard to find any conflicting sides at all! Some scholars express worries that conflict frames are hiding much relevant information, such as that concerning causality or responsibility (Neuman et al 1992). On the other hand, absence of conflict may also be a reason for worries. Hadenius (1997) suggests that the media were slow starters when it came to reporting the toxic leak at Hallandsås. Early indications were allegedly ignored, and Hadenius blames media logic: media usually works in a two-party-conflict paradigm. In this case no conflicting parties could easily be defined, at least beforehand. The story of the tunnel scandal thus for a long time, before the dying cattle were found, remained a non-story, since it did not fit in to the working logic of news media.

The local media may well have provided the people of Båstad with adequate and high quality information about the Hallandsås incident. Particularly that goes for the basic messages about immediate risks, causes and consequences of the toxic leak. Other studies in which the information aspect of news is assessed have reported that media provided satisfactory information (Asp 1998; Dahlgren et al 1998). The present report provides no assessment of the information in the news. The great number of articles, with a purely informative content, points in the direction that basic information has been given priority. A question that calls for further research is whether the thematic accounts of the incident have been covered in any amount worth mentioning. In the Hallandsås case, more focus in reporting on the political context of the tunnel construction would probably have given more space to the question of responsibility.

In addition, it would have given us a more varied picture of both which the conflicting parties are and who is to be blamed.

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