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The Constructionist Approach to Framing: Bringing Culture Back In

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This article aims, within the constructionist paradigm, at integrating culture into the framing process. Four characteristics are important for this approach: the distinction between the event, the media content, and the frame; the explicit attention to the reconstruction of frame packages; the relationship between frame packages and cultural phenomena; and the interaction between frame sponsors, key events, media content, schemata, and the stock of frames. An elaborated framing model is presented, and, subsequently, the constructionist approach is compared with priming and agenda setting. Finally, the methodological implications are discussed, in order to develop a strategy to reconstruct frame packages.

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In recent years, framing theory has taken over from agenda-setting and cultivation theory as the most commonly applied research approach in the field of communication science (Bryant & Miron, 2004). The framing concept, however, does not belong exclusively to the tool set of the communication scholar. In fact, its origins lie in the fields of cognitive psychology (Bartlett, 1932) and anthropology (Bateson, 1955/1972). Subsequently, it was adopted by other disciplines, often with a shift in meaning, including sociology (e.g., Goffman, 1974), economics (e.g., Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), linguistics (e.g., Tannen, 1979), social-movements research (e.g., Snow & Benford, 1988), policy research (e.g., Schön & Rein, 1994), communication science (e.g., Tuchman, 1978), political communication (e.g., Gitlin, 1980), public-relations research (e.g., Hallahan, 1999), and health communication (e.g., Rothman & Salovey, 1997). All these research traditions are expressions of a strong belief in the research potential of the framing concept.

Yet, the broad range of perspectives on the precise nature of frames and the diversity of research approaches would also suggest that the concept is gradually becoming a “passe-partout.” The multiple meanings of the words “frame” and “framing”—that is, the frame as a “framework” and framing in the sense of

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“shaping”—are largely to blame for the vagueness that persists and the absence of an unequivocal conceptualization.

Frames seem to become perceptible in all shapes and sizes. Research approaches that analyze message content in order to ascertain how the media represent a certain topic are regularly referred to as frame analyses, although sometimes they distinguish no frame at all. Further, in prospect theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979) the frames are usually conceived as rather subtle changes in phrasing. However, by just changing some words—for example, “The less you smoke, the easier it will be to quit” becomes “The more you smoke, the harder it will be to quit” in a health campaign (Wong & McMurray, 2002)—one can wonder whether or not the frame has changed too. Furthermore, in recent framing research the attention shifts to very specific issue frames that are only applicable to certain topics, or to broadly defined generic frames, that seem to be ubiquitous (cf. De Vreese, Peter, & Semetko, 2001). In order to avoid confusion, some authors (e.g., Entman, 2004) argue that in some instances the term frame can be replaced with script, or with labels such as representation, argument, or genre.

The first purpose of the present essay is to define the characteristics of frames in the context of the production and the interpretation of news, so as to give the concept a more distinctive meaning. Additionally, it will incorporate the linkage between frames in the news production process and frames on the side of the receiver, as some authors have urged (e.g., Scheufele, 1999). Because culture is seen as a primary base to constitute knowledge, meaning and comprehension of the world outside (Hall, 1997), it will be argued that a shared repertoire of frames in culture provides the linkage between news production and news consumption. Framing refers, on the one hand, to the typical manner in which journalists shape news content within a familiar frame of reference and according to some latent structure of meaning and, on the other hand, to the audience who adopts these frames and sees the world in a similar way as the journalists do (McQuail, 2005; Tuchman, 1978).

In other words, this article will elaborate on the usefulness of framing as a bridging concept between cognition and culture (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992, p. 384). Carragee and Roefs (2004) already discussed the neglect of power in recent framing research, because it fails in examining framing processes within wider political and social contexts. This means that not only power should be brought back in, as they argued, but also culture (cf. Gamson & Meyer, 1996; McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996). Therefore, the effort here is to argue how frames, as part of culture, get embedded in media content, how they work, and how they interact with the schemata of both the journalist and the audience member. Next, framing is compared with priming and agenda setting, two research traditions in which some will claim that framing plays a secondary part (e.g., Takeshita, 1997). The exposé concludes with a brief discussion of some methods that may be applied in the reconstruction of frame packages that are embedded in discourse and in media texts.

The arguments are largely based on an interpretative review of most of the original sources on framing that fit in the social constructionist approach, such as

the work of Goffman, Gamson, and associates. Social constructionism is concerned with the creation and institutionalization of reality in social interaction (see Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In the context of media studies, this approach emphasizes the role of an active, interpreting, meaning-constructing audience (Wicks, 2001). It stresses that “different kinds of issues are interpreted by the media and by the public in different ways, and [that] communications theory must be sensitive to these differences” (Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992, p. 17). Media makers apply a range of persistent frames, and as such they possibly control the number of alternatives that are available to the receivers when they are constructing social reality (McCullagh, 2002; Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Potter, 1996; Reese, 2001). Because frames contribute to the interpretation and evaluative definition of the social world, the functionality of frames is a point of particular interest (e.g., Entman, 1993; Gamson, 1992; Tewksbury, Jones, Peske, Raymond, & Vig, 2000; Tuchman, 1978). Finally, frames seem to influence the attribution of causal and treatment responsibility (e.g., Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2005; Downs, 2002; Iyengar, 1991; Scheufele, 2000; Wakefield, McLeod, & Smith, 2003). Consequently, frames can be defined as “conceptual tools which media and individuals rely on to convey, interpret, and evaluate information” (Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992, p. 60).

Characteristics of frames and framing

Part of culture

In general, framing literature conveys the impression that frames can be encountered on several locations in the communication process, in the minds of media makers and the audience, in media content, and in culture (Entman, 1993). In a way, frames seem to be everywhere, but no one knows where exactly they begin and where they end. Therefore, I will suggest following Goffman (1974, 1981) who considers frames, with their own logic and meaning, as independently as possible from the individual and emphasizes instead their connection with culture. “Frames are a central part of a culture and are institutionalized in various ways,” as he stated (Goffman, 1981, p. 63). Culture refers to an organized set of beliefs, codes, myths, stereotypes, values, norms, frames, and so forth that are shared in the collective memory of a group or society (cf. Zald, 1996). Because the individual is not able to change these persistent cultural phenomena, the repertoire of frames is, conceptually, situated largely externally of the individual, just as a single person does not invent the game of chess, the stock market, or pedestrian traffic, as Goffman (1981) argued. Yet, individuals make use of these cultural phenomena, precisely as media workers apply and magnify them in media content and present them to their audiences (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p. 60).

This conceptualization of a cultural stock of frames serves to formulate six additional premises, which guide my theorizing about framing. First, the notion of a cultural stock of frames more easily leads to the idea that there are more frames than those that are currently applied. Alternatives are available, for the media professionals and for the receivers, that can lead to different definitions of topics, issues,

and persons. Consequently, framing enables journalists and the audience to see that the same events make different kinds of sense depending upon the frame applied. It follows that one needs to transcend the currently applied frames and to distinguish them from other, alternative frames, in order to be able to explain the persistency of these frames (cf. James, 1890/1950, pp. 283–324). Therefore, in a frame analysis it can be useful to identify the frames that are dominantly applied in other social, political, or historical contexts and periods.

Second, because frames are part of culture, the actual frame is not encompassed in media content. The text and the frame must be seen as independent from one another. Both the attribution of meaning to media content and the connection with certain frames are part of the reading process. The receiver side of the framing model suggests, however, that the receivers connect the framing devices in a news story with cultural phenomena because they are already familiar with them. By implicitly suggesting a cultural theme, the frames can determine which meaning the receiver attaches to an issue.

Moreover, and third, because these frames are related to cultural phenomena, their use seems so normal and natural that the process of social construction remains invisible (Gamson et al., 1992). Because these frames often are unnoticed and implicit, their impact is by stealth. Frames may, in that respect, be regarded as a power mechanism in their own right. However, whether or not frames actually bring about individual effects depends on several factors, such as the receivers' degree of attention, interests, beliefs, experiences, desires, and attitudes. In that respect, a frame is an invitation or an incentive to read a news story in a particular way.

Fourth, the cultural approach incorporates the impact of a macrostructure in the framing process. As such, it becomes more obvious that the way individuals interpret media content is not solely internally motivated but also guided by cultural processes (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Because frames are part of culture, they are not the same as a personal mental structure, and there are probably no strictly individual frames (cf. Kinder & Sanders, 1990; Scheufele, 1999, p. 107). Psychologists such as Minsky (1975) refer to cognitive mental frameworks as frames. In order to avoid confusion, it is recommended to call such mental structures schemata (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). The main difference between a schema and a frame is that schemata, defined as collections of organized knowledge, develop gradually, become more complex, and are related to personal experiences and associated feelings (cf. Wicks, 2001). Schemata help individuals deal with the flood of new information as well as retrieve stored information from memory (Graber, 1988). Frames, on the contrary, are rather stable, because they are part of culture. They constitute broader interpretative definitions of social reality and are highly interactive with dynamic schemata (Benford & Snow, 2000).

Fifth, the persistent character of frames means, first and foremost, that a frame changes very little or gradually over time (see also Goffman, 1981; cf. Zald, 1996). "Dynamic" meaning structures that change constantly depending on the situation and the topic to which they are applied are not frames in the strict sense. To attribute

a persistent character to frames is not to say that the framing process as such should be regarded as static. On the contrary, the framing process is dynamic. The application of frames is subject to negotiation; frames are contested by journalists and the audience, new ones are selected and others may disappear without the frames themselves undergoing any change.

Therefore, and finally, the essence of framing is in social interaction (Snow & Benford, 1988; Steinberg, 1998, pp. 852–853). Media makers interact with their sources and other actors in the public arena, and the receivers interact with media content and with each other. Thus, framing involves the interplay that occurs between the textual level (frames applied in the media), the cognitive level (schemata among the audience and media makers), the extramedial level (the discourse of frame sponsors; discussed below), and, finally, the stock of frames that is available in a given culture.

The constituent elements of a frame package

Frames in culture are difficult to get a grip on. However, it is possible to reconstruct them. They get embedded in media content during the frame process, when journalists construct the news message in such a way that many elements refer to that frame. Each frame that a journalist has applied in a text can be represented as a “frame package,”¹ a cluster of logical organized devices that function as an identity kit for a frame. Therefore, a principal part of a frame analysis is the reconstruction of these frame packages. Such a frame package is composed of three parts that will be defined subsequently: the manifest framing devices, the manifest or latent reasoning devices, and an implicit cultural phenomenon that displays the package as a whole (cf. Gamson & Lasch, 1983; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989).

The frame manifests itself in media content through various framing devices, such as word choice, metaphors, exemplars, descriptions, arguments, and visual images (Gamson & Lasch, 1983; Pan & Kosicki, 1993). All conceivable framing devices that point at the same core idea constitute the manifest part of a frame package. These devices are held together under the heading of a central organizing theme—that is, the actual frame, which provides the frame package with a coherent structure (cf. Donati, 1992). My focus is on frame packages in which a cultural phenomenon functions as a central theme, such as an archetype (e.g., the victim; Berns, 2004), a mythical figure (e.g., Goliath vs. David; Dahinden, 2006), a value (e.g., freedom of speech; Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997), or a narrative (e.g., devil’s bargain; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989).

These cultural phenomena, however, do not equate the frame, because they often lack the quality to define and understand other events, issues, and persons (Fisher, 1997). Therefore, essential to a frame package are the reasoning devices: explicit and implicit statements that deal with justifications, causes, and consequences in a temporal order, and which complete the frame package (Gamson & Lasch, 1983; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). The reasoning devices are related to the four framing functions which Entman (1993) distinguished, namely the promotion of a particular

problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation (see also Gamson, 1992; Snow & Benford, 1988).

I agree with Entman (2004) who argued that the mere application of a frame should promote a certain interpretation, problem definition, and causal relationships. On the basis of this conceptualization, the human-interest frame, the conflict frame, and the thematic frame might alternatively be conceptualized as scripts (Entman, 2004) or news formats (Iyengar, 1991, p. 13). For instance, if the handover of Hong Kong to China was covered as a conflict between two or more parties, or by bringing a human face to the event, the question would still remain how the conflict was covered or what kind of person was portrayed. The Chinese media, however, used a frame package in which the myth of Chinese as a nation family functioned as a central theme (Pan, Lee, Chan, & So, 1999). As such, the meaning of the handover became clear: Western imperialists bear the causal responsibility, and the solution was one country with two political and economical systems.

How frames work

The connection between framing and reasoning devices in a text on the one hand and the actual frame on the other happens during the interpretation of the message by the journalist and the audience on the basis of a cognitive process. This process ensures that the complexity of the event is reduced to a graspable plausible whole. The frame package suggests a definition, an explanation, a problematization, and an evaluation of the event and ultimately results in a number of logical conclusions—for example, with regard to who is responsible for the perceived problem. As such, the media provide the public not only with information on the event itself but also on how it should be interpreted. Consequently, framing is a form of metacommunication. That is, the frame specifies the relationship between a number of connected elements in a text on the basis of which an issue or a topic may be defined and understood (Bateson, 1955/1972). In other words, there is a manifest message with a specific content, while there is also the frame that indicates how the message should be interpreted (cf. Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). Such communication on communication helps the receiver to structure and define reality. The notion of metacommunication implies that the meaning readers assign to a text is not determined merely by the concrete information that it contains but also by implicit information between the lines (Gurevitch & Levy, 1986). Therefore, an essential aspect of the framing process on the receiver side is that the frame provides a context within which the news message can be interpreted (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997).

The very heart of the framing mechanism is that, at a cognitive level, the framing devices that are incorporated in the news message activate a schema that hypothetically corresponds with the frame preferred by the journalist. Further, the frame package recalls a schema on the basis of which the receiver fills in the other reasoning devices that are not explicitly incorporated in the message. Frames are tied in with shared cultural phenomena, and because of cultural resonances and narrative fidelity (Benford & Snow, 2000; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989), it can be expected that media

content evokes a schema that is in line with the frame. After all, the notion of framing presupposes that the frame prevents the receiver from using schemata that are contrary to the frame in their interpretation of the message. This quality in turn may result in elements in the text that do not belong to the frame package being selectively dropped out, adapted, or marginalized (cf. Donati, 1992).

Some framing devices are so powerful that a single reference to them suffices to activate a schema. The receivers tie in a causal chain of reasoning devices within a frame package, of which, except for that one framing device, nothing is explicitly included in the text. Therefore, it is possible for a frame not to occupy a central position in the structure of the text but merely to be fleetingly present in a number of devices. On the whole, though, these framing devices will also be given a prominent position within the general structure of a news report, for example, in the title of a newspaper article or in the introduction (Van Dijk, 1988), because the package idea suggests that a frame manifests itself through all kinds of devices.

Whereas a media message inevitably contains elements that are incongruent with the dominant frame, the frame does have the effect of making elements that are congruent more salient, so that the receiver is more likely to notice them (Entman, 1991). However, the frame can still generate unintended effects, especially when members of the audience associate additional thoughts with the message that are not congruent with the frame the journalist wanted to apply. I presume that this is especially the case when the receivers are less fascinated by the news story and do not give in to the frame, but are able to look at the frame.

As a frame is not inextricably linked with any particular topic, it should be possible to identify frames that define an identical situation in a different way. Thus, a topic may be framed in several ways, and a frame may be applied to various topics. For example, as many Western European countries are confronted with a firm influx of asylum seekers and undocumented immigrants, public policy regularly has to find sites for new reception centers. Journalists can cover the establishment of such an asylum center in a community by applying a range of frames, as a result of which the establishment could be framed in at least six different ways (see Van Gorp, 2005): (a) as a proof of misgovernment (theme: altruistic democracy; Gans, 1979), (b) as an aggregate of suspicious and criminal strangers (theme: strangers are intruders), (c) as a sign of our hospitality (theme: "Everything in the garden's lovely"; cf. Hall, 1976, p. 185), (d) as an opportunity for the neighborhood (theme: the donor; cf. Propp, 1928/1958), (e) as a shelter for needy refugees (theme: the innocent victim), and (f) as a cause of inconveniences because the location is poorly chosen (theme: Not In My Back Yard).

Each of these frames can also be applied to cover different events and topics. The archetype of the victim, for example, can also serve as a central theme to cover domestic violence, to name just one example, as a result of which women are portrayed as weak and vulnerable and absolved from responsibility for the causes (Berns, 2004; Holstein & Miller, 1990; Silverblatt, Ferry, & Finan, 1999, pp. 164–165). Finally, because a frame is characterized by some level of abstraction, so that it should

be applicable to (entirely) different issues, it can be argued that an issue-specific frame, that is, a frame that is applicable only to one particular issue, in fact is preferably linked to another, more abstract “master” frame.

An encompassing framing model

Selection and construction

Even if reporters are personal witnesses to the event, they can only perceive part of reality. The inability to perceive objective reality and the chaotic stream of disjointed impressions in their entirety explains why selection and ordering by the media is inevitable. An essential point is salience or the process of emphasizing certain information and making it more significant so that the audience will notice it more easily (Entman, 1993). Whereas a text inevitably contains elements that are incongruent with the dominant frame, the frame does have the effect of making elements that are congruent more salient, so that the receiver is more likely to notice them (Entman, 1991). In other words, selection and construction are basic procedures in the framing of a message. Note, however, that the main function of the manifest framing devices is to trigger the schema, and therefore salience is crucial, whereas the reasoning devices and the cultural phenomena that carry the true weight of the frame package and the framing process need not even be present and certainly not repeated within media content.

It is assumed in framing theory that media makers deliberately or unwittingly make use of frames. In this sense, the “selection” of a frame is a significant decision on the part of the journalist. The frame that at the end gets embedded in the news message is, however, not determined a priori by the situation or the item reported upon. If they were, then it would follow that there is a “correct” frame, namely the frame that corresponds with the event. The task of the journalist could then consist in representing this correct or appropriate frame as accurately as possible. The elements belonging to this structure may stem from the event or occurrence, whereas this is not the case for the connection between these elements in the news story, as Hackett (1984) stressed.

The interactive character of the constructionist approach suggests that in the phase of frame building (Scheufele, 1999), media makers not only make use of frames but frames also influence the schema of the journalists when they have to represent an issue or an occurrence as a newsworthy event. There is interaction between the journalist’s (un)conscious selection of a frame—out of the cultural stock of frames—as the result of the individual belief system, and the influence of additional factors inside and outside the media organizations. For example, Gans (1979) described some basic values that journalists hold, such as small-town pastoralism and social order, that can be tied in with some frame packages. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) distinguished three additional levels of influence, which all in their own respect have an impact on the outcomes of the news production process and on the application of frames: first, the influence of media routines; second, the organization

level; and third, the extramedia level. Gitlin (1980) believes that journalistic routines cause some frames to be selected more often than others. Further, ownership and the economic logic of news organizations create more potential conflicts of interest that interact with individual journalistic procedures (Shoemaker & Reese). It is regularly argued that power forces external to news organizations partly shape the degree of journalistic autonomy and journalists' interpretations, for example with regard to the interaction between social movements and the media (e.g., Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Zald, 1996). In that respect, the combined action of key events and the dialogical interaction with frame sponsors offers an opportunity to examine the origins of frame contests and frame shifts.

Key events and the interaction with frame sponsors

A key event can lead to the activation of alternative frames in the media, certainly if the events become part of our collective memory (Brosius & Eps, 1995; Scheufele, 2004). For example, Gamson and Modigliani (1989) described how accidents with nuclear plants in Three Mile Island and Chernobyl caused a shift in frames. The original progress frame shifted into two other frames, namely the fatalistic-runaway frame and the Faustian devil's-bargain frame. Consequently, it is possible for a frame that is initially used as a standard frame to be applied to similar events or occurrences without its use being called into question.

In specific situations, such as news conferences or government statements, certain sponsors of a particular frame—interest groups, spin doctors, advertisers, and so forth—may strategically try to convince the media to cover a situation in accordance with “their” frame, that is, by prior strategic decision making regarding the manner in which they will announce their viewpoints (Brewer, 2002; Edelman, 1993; Entman, 2004). Frame sponsors are concerned with directing the perception and the frame selection of journalists as they report on an event (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Tewksbury et al. (2000, p. 806) call such carefully applied, persuasive instruments *advocate frames*.

I may assume that in the case of, for example, press releases provided by frame sponsors and whose purpose is to convince the receiver as much as to inform them, the choice of frame is quite deliberate. But even then it is still possible for the journalist to report on the news conference within a counterframe to the one presented, or even to ignore the proposed frame altogether (cf. Benford, 1993; Callaghan & Schnell, 2001; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Yet, because many media rely on the same information sources, and indeed serve as information source for one another, identical frames may appear in different media. This enhances the persuasive power of the frames, because the media appear to address the audience with a single voice.

The impact of frame sponsors brings me to an important distinction with implications for anyone studying frames in the media, namely the distinction between framing *by* the media and framing *through* the media. In the former case, the journalists arrive at a particular frame in their representation of an event, whereas in the latter, framing is concerned with frames that have been processed in communication

utterances by frame sponsors and other actors—for example, by politicians when answering questions from journalists. I suppose, however, that the main focus should be on framing by the media, mainly because I feel that even representing a statement made during an interview, whoever the interviewee may be, implies choices by the medium in question, so that it is part of a framing process. The choice to represent a statement or not, the prominence that is given to the statement, and the exact formulation are, in other words, much more the result of journalistic practices than the many parentheses in newspapers would suggest.

The interplay between media content and receivers

While one person may take a framing device strongly into consideration when reading or hearing a news story, another may decide to ignore that element, even though both are exposed to the same frame. However, when cultural themes constitute the central framing idea, there is probably a stronger basis for resonance between the media text and the schema of the receivers. Nelson et al. (1997) examined in an experimental setting the interpretation of a news story about a rally of the extremist Ku Klux Klan and the effect on tolerance for the Klan. The results showed that the tolerance for the very same event varied significantly according to frame conditions with two competing values: the rights to free speech and the preservation of public order.

If receivers define and interpret an issue in correspondence with the preferences of the sender, they follow the preferred meaning (Hall, 1980). In addition, the considerations associated with this schema are “at the top of the head” of the receiver (Zaller, 1992), which will probably result in a cognitive, affective, and behavioral response that is related to the frame. On the other hand, the framing process is interactive, vulnerable, and in all its phases prone to counterframes, because the audience actively interprets news messages. That is why these frames can cause effects that are hard to predict and control by the journalists (Scheufele, 2000). The member of the audience can take a negotiated position (Hall, 1980) when the interpretation of the media content is a mixture of adapted elements within the frame package and only partly in accordance with the frame, or an oppositional position (Hall, 1980), when the receiver’s schema does not correspond to the frame. The more often schemata are confirmed by further information, or by congruent framing devices, the more difficult it becomes to refute or change them by counterframing. Consequently, inconsistent information may be ignored (Festinger, 1957) or attributed to coincidental situational factors (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Schutz (1945/1964, pp. 207–259) noted that, sometimes, a kind of shock is required for the receiver to be able to break through a persistent frame.

Framing compared with agenda setting and priming

Framing, agenda setting, and priming contribute, each in their own right, to our understanding of the media and their impact. The argument that framing is just an

extension of agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1993) is in contradiction with the sociological origins of framing (Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Maher, 2001). Within a cultural and constructionist approach, framing can be distinguished from agenda setting and priming in at least two respects.

First, constructionism emphasizes the interactive process in which social reality is constructed. By contrast, the theoretical premises of both agenda setting and priming are causal (Scheufele, 2000). Agenda setting chiefly studies to what extent people regard issues as being important as a result of the emphasis on these issues in the media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Willnat, 1997), and priming demonstrates the influence of these prominent issues on the selection criteria that people use to evaluate political actors (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987) or on electoral voting behavior (Sheafer & Weimann, 2005).

The premises of constructionism, however, are not exclusively formulated in terms of the effects of media content on the public (Neuman et al., 1992, pp. 17–19). From a constructionist perspective, media content constitutes both a dependent and an independent variable. Media content is the result of journalistic routines and extra-media pressures, and it is actively processed by the audience. As such, the framing concept uniquely combines elements that can generate strong media effects with factors that limit this impact (McQuail, 2005). The frames refer to the different ways the news media can cover an issue persuasively, but the framing process takes also into account the role of diverse levels of the journalistic production process and of an interpreting audience. Moreover, frames are tied in with culture as a macrosocietal structure. This implies that framing incorporates a wider range of factors than priming and agenda setting that are both cognitive concepts (cf. Price & Tewksbury, 1997).

Second, agenda setting and priming are concerned with issues, so with “the shell of the topic” (Kosicki, 1993). The conception of framing, however, makes an explicit distinction between issues and frames: One issue can be covered from multiple angles or frames, and the same frame is applicable to cover diverse issues. In framing research, attention can be paid to alternative hypotheses, such as the prediction that the media can take up an issue from the political agenda but use an opposite frame to cover it, or the particular ways a frame can become dominant and how it subsequently is applied to cover a diversity of topics. These aspects slip the notice of agenda-setting research.

Even the scope of the second level of agenda setting remains more limited, as in this approach attributes of politicians are labeled as frames and compared with the attributes the voters consider as being important (Ghanem, 1997; McCombs, Lopez-Escobar, & Llamas, 2000), whereas the role of the journalist, for example, is ignored (Maher, 2001). In the light of our conceptualization, it is important that these separate attributes may function as framing devices, but the question then remains how they make up a frame package. That is: What is the structuring idea that makes the package into a whole?

Because framing devices can activate a schema, which fits in with the frame message, this temporary activation and increased accessibility of considerations is

referred to as priming (Jo & Berkowitz, 1994; Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen, & Dillman Carpentier, 2002), and as such priming is a cognitive mechanism that is part of the initial message processing in the framing model. As a result of this, the receiver attaches meaning to a news story. Framing in a constructionist approach, however, refers also to the production of news, which is not an exclusive cognitive process, as many structural factors are influencing media content (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). The weight the receiver attaches to particular values goes beyond accessibility—through which priming operates—because it refers also to the applicability of certain framing devices within the receiver's schemata (Nelson et al., 1997; Price & Tewksbury, 1997). The additional idea that priming stands for the impact of media content on the making of subsequent judgments is a second-order effect of media content that falls largely outside the scope of the constructionist conceptualization. After all, the interpretation of a news message occurs online during initial message processing (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Price & Tewksbury, 1997, p. 198).

Methodological implications

The question arises how frames and their relationship with journalistic practices and with individual schemata can be studied reliably. Even if the purpose is to study how the audience interacts with media content, it is still necessary to reconstruct the frames that are embedded in the stimuli in order to compare the receiver's interpretation with the frame package and the core frame. As a first step of a frame analysis, frame packages can be reconstructed on the basis of the framing devices in texts with a cultural phenomenon as a central idea and, as the case may be, reasoning devices that are demonstrably part of media content and discourse.

Some researchers opt for a rather qualitative approach, such as discourse analysis (e.g., Pan & Kosicki, 1993), whereas others apply traditional content analysis (e.g., Tankard, 2001) or other quantitative methods (e.g., Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000) to try to get a grip on these frames. But are frame analysis and traditional content analysis actually compatible with one another? After all, a frame also finds expression in latent meaning structures that are not perceived directly. How could one possibly measure these structures and, at the same time, fulfill the criteria of reliability, reproducibility, and validity? This can be achieved by accepting a heuristic principle, namely that a series of manifest variables can represent a latent concept (Neuendorf, 2002). The respective framing devices, transmuted in measurable variables, all refer to the frame as a latent meaning structure. More concretely, the causal statements (the reasoning devices) and the properties that together constitute the discursive domain of the media text (the framing devices) are identified. The reasoning devices can be found in the text, but they may also be implicit statements, when a previous fact and a consequence are placed side by side without the causal relationship between the two being specified.

An important question is whether the striving for scientific accuracy stands in the way of possible insight that the framing perspective has to offer. It emerges from

research by Tankard (2001) that one should take no more than two frames as a starting point in order to arrive at an acceptable level of intercoder reliability. However, by reducing a more extensive list of frames to, for example, a (positive) frame for and a (negative) frame against, one runs the risk that precisely the subtlety of the messages that framing analysis tries to consider may be lost (Gandy, 2001). The researcher should bear this paradox in mind. If one only takes into account the framing devices that are countable, then the actual frame may not be determined.

The strongly abstract nature of frames implies that quantitative research methods should be combined with the interpretative prospects of qualitative methods. For example, one could start with inductively drawing up an inventory of frames on the basis of media content, public discourse, and a literature review. In this manner, the framing devices that are most indicative of the frames are identified. Subsequently, the researchers determine through deduction to what extent these devices are present in the complete data set.

In the inductive phase, it is recommended to reconstruct the frames by representing each of the frame packages in a matrix (e.g., see Gamson & Lasch, 1983; Van Gorp, 2005) in which the row entries represent the frames and the column entries describe the framing and reasoning devices. To get to this frame matrix inductively, one can start with the analysis of a strategically chosen set of media texts and determine for each text which elements and propositions can probably function as framing or reasoning devices. Then, the frame analyst can identify logical chains of framing and reasoning devices across the separate texts. In accordance with the principle of constant comparison, the most representative devices can be identified and, finally, integrated in frame packages that are presented in a frame matrix. This is a practical way to demonstrate how the central framing theme holds among a coherent structure of devices.

To grasp this central idea by suggesting a name for each frame package in the matrix can sometimes be a hard exercise, though, because “coming up with the names for frames itself involves a kind of framing” (Tankard, 2001, p. 89). For instance, in Entman’s (1991) frequently cited frame analysis of the coverage of two airplane incidents, in the end, the two exhaustively defined frame packages are not labeled with a name. “Humanity caught in the trap of their own technological progress” and “man’s inhumanity to man,” two shared narratives mentioned by Price and Tewksbury (1997, p. 178), could, however, function as the name for the frame packages in this household frame analysis. It follows that the identification of the frames must be sufficiently abstract to be applicable in other cases and in similar situations. In other words, there must be evidence of a certain degree of generalization, which can be achieved by associating the frames with cultural phenomena.

Conclusions

In the present article, it has been argued that the purpose of a frame analysis is to assess not so much the impact of loose elements in a text but the impact of the

implicitly present cultural phenomena conveyed by all these elements as a whole and to relate them to the dynamic processes in which social reality is constructed. Although this framing perspective provides insight into news reporting, its sources, and the role of the receiver, there is a downside: These benefits require a significant research cost. Framing research is labor intensive, and there is no guaranteed yield. Moreover, the researcher is bound to make a whole series of decisions in the course of a study, so that subjective interpretation would appear to be virtually inevitable.

The constructionist approach to framing, however, also has benefits that can open up some new perspectives on framing research. In this approach, an explicit distinction is made between, on the one hand, the event and the related media content, and on the other hand, the frames. Consequently, it is much more obvious to think of news content as one conceivable way within a spectrum of possibilities to report about a certain event, topic, or person. The frame is a persuasive invitation, a stimulus, to read a news story in a particular way, so that a specific definition of an event, the causal and treatment responsibility for a societal topic, and a moral judgment of a person come more easily across the receiver's mind. Furthermore, these reasoning devices do not need to be explicitly mentioned in media content. The frame, which is linked to all kinds of cultural phenomena, functions to join the schemata of the receiver who can easily fill in the blanks. As such, the constructionist approach highlights the interaction between the interpreting activities of the receivers and the power of the frame that is present in a number of elements in media content.

By locating frames in culture, the framing process, which is often conceptualized as a matter of individual cognition, is directed by the larger culture. Within a constructionist view, the potency of frames to influence the public lies in the fact that they are closely linked with familiar cultural frames. Cultural resonances contribute to the fact that devices are often perceived as familiar, so that the frames to which they refer can remain unnoticed. These micro-macro linkages situate journalists and the members of the audience in a context in which they interact with the larger society and many frame sponsors, and it is in that dynamic social process where social reality is produced, reproduced, and transformed.

Proceeding from a strong belief in the research potential of framing, I defined the concept on the basis of a constructionist approach. Constructionism makes a plea in favor of integrating several aspects of the communication process in a frame analysis and not to limit it to media content or to a form of media effects. The idea that frames are part of culture, as expressed in the somewhat older literature on framing, has been put forward as a tool to understand the processes underlying framing and to guide future research. Frame packages with a cultural phenomenon as a central theme influence the schema of both the journalist and the audience member, because these frames are part and parcel of their shared collective memory.

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Note

- 1 Gamson and Modigliani (1989) launched the term “media package.” As this suggests that the package is a product of the media, and not of a broader culture and society, I prefer to use the term “frame package.” Some frame packages can be applied abundantly in, for example, the discourse of pressure groups or subcultures, whereas the media do not take them up.

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