

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Framing Project: A Bridging Model for Media Research Revisited

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Framing, unlike many more esoteric research concepts, has gained remarkable popularity in both the scholarly literature and the public imagination. As with its often-associated idea of media agenda setting, people intuitively grasp what it conveys, although framing suggests more intentionality on the part of the framer and relates more explicitly to political strategy. As a result, academics such as George Lakoff and Geoffrey Nunberg have found recent visibility as political groups, particularly liberal, try to figure out how they lost the “framing wars.” Lakoff says that conservatives bend ideas to fit a coherent narrative; Nunberg says that narrative is only rhetorical, providing only the illusion of coherence (Drum, 2006). Thus, even between linguists differences arise as to what to make of framing as a theoretical idea—differences that become wider when played out across other disciplines. The interdisciplinary quality of the communication field has meant a natural diversity of approaches, leading some to urge more effort toward cleaning up the framing paradigm, making it more theoretically respectable and coherent (e.g., Scheufele, 2004).

Framing’s value, however, does not hinge on its potential as a unified research domain but, as I have suggested before, as a provocative model that bridges parts of the field that need to be in touch with each other: quantitative and qualitative, empirical and interpretive, psychological and sociological, and academic and professional. If the most interesting happens at the edges of disciplines—and in the center of policy debates—then framing certainly has the potential to bring disciplinary perspectives together in interesting ways. At least, framing alerts researchers to the possibilities available from other perspectives. In that respect, I am in agreement with D’Angelo (2002) that framing is more of a research program than a unified paradigm and that theoretical diversity has been beneficial in developing a comprehensive understanding of the process (if not a consistent terminology). I am not sure, however, how well we have taken advantage of these new possibilities.

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Of course, a conceptual framework guiding individual research cannot be internally contradictory and must be matched with appropriate methods. But while being careful about terms, it is important not to be too narrow. Like a paradigm, framing opens up questions that were not on the table before. In particular, it may encourage empiricists to consider more interpretive aspects of their questions. For more interpretive critical research, it opens up opportunities to more explicitly examine ideological concepts of “definition of the situation” and “naturalizing” not just assuming that the powerful are able to set and naturalize those definitions unproblematically. As a theoretical perspective, framing helps add some critical flavor to the media-effects approach on one side while taming with more observational precision the media hegemony view on the other. In that respect, framing has brought a useful respectability to what was easily marginalized as an “unscientific” critical theory.

Framing has put together strange bedfellows that differ in important philosophical assumptions. Whether reality is socially constructed or empirically “out there,” experiences vary in certain important ways to reveal observable patterns. If there were no regularities with consequences for social action, we would not find them of interest, as we do within framing analysis. Tuchman’s (1978) often-cited phenomenologically based research, for example, examines how “news” is brought into being by the active forces of order that bracket out certain happenings via the routinized, legitimized, and institutionalized structures that favor certain ways of seeing. It would be too static a view that experience is completely defined in advance, but it is a valuable corrective to the news-as-“out there” idea. In a dynamic “feedforward” process, we see what the system and frames embedded within them allow us to see, an important idea regardless of epistemology.

Among recent reviews, D’Angelo (2002) notes that the framing program is guided by a combination of the cognitive, constructivist, and critical perspectives. Given the historically strong emphasis in communication research on media effects, it is not surprising to see the cognitive perspective receiving the most emphasis. That helps explain why Carragee and Roefs (2004) claim that there has been a “neglect of power” in the area. The cognitive perspective has been largely agnostic concerning how frames are implicated in societal-level power, dealing with the “negotiation” or interaction of psychological structures as coping devices for message elements. The constructivist perspective (e.g., Gamson & Modigliani, 1989) has regarded frames as relatively benign resources, tools that are more or less accessible to social actors, whereas the critical perspective has regarded frames as controlling, hegemonic, and tied to larger elite structures. An awareness of these issues across areas keeps the framing program from becoming too constricted and losing valuable cross-fertilization.

Scheufele (2004), for example, correctly notes that there is a tendency for frame reductionism that valuable insights from the public discourse and social movement areas are not taken into account. Highlighting simple description of media frames is tempting, and a frequent approach given the easy availability of media texts, but this risks reifying them—locking them in place, as though they were not part of a larger conversation, serving particular interests, and undergoing changes over time.

A bridging model

The gravitational pull of these research areas was made clear to me about 10 years ago when a colleague invited me to prepare a keynote address for a framing conference he was planning. He informed me that I had somehow become associated with the perspective, which was news to me although one of my articles had been called “Routine framing of the Persian Gulf War” (Reese & Buckalew, 1994). That term just seemed to fit the kind of things I wanted to say about news coverage. It captured a sense of “structure” that I found lacking in the “list of topics” style of other methods. In an earlier study, for the same reason, I had taken a network-analysis approach to examining the structure of television news sources (Reese, Grant, & Danielian, 1994). I still think of frames as structures that draw boundaries, set up categories, define some ideas as out and others in, and generally operate to snag related ideas in their net in an active process. For me, that captures the way meaning can be embedded across stories, media, and time. As an approach to media texts, framing seems to capture more of the “network society” (Castells, 2000) paradigm than the traditional sender–receiver, message-effects model. And when looking at frames spread across discourse, rather than contained strictly within individual message/story packages, it reflects how frames are embedded in the symbolic environment.

I welcomed the chance to declare myself an expert in this emerging domain (which led to the edited volume Reese, Gandy, & Grant, 2001), although I have not been too concerned with advocating for it any kind of disciplinary or paradigmatic status. My main interest has been in definitional clarity and openness to the interesting questions framing provokes. It appealed to my somewhat eclectic approach to research, although I do have my preferences. In a synthesis of the area, I offered the following definition that I hoped captured something of this bridging idea:

Frames are organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world.
(Reese, 2001, p. 11)

By highlighting the “principles” aspect, I wanted to avoid rooting frames in some static feature of either media texts or individual psychological elements. Symbolic content is a manifestation of those principles. Embedded in this definition are a number of variables that I meant to help generate some research questions, such as the extent to which frames organize, are shared, persist, and forth. I also wanted to capture what I regard as the most interesting aspect of frames: their dynamic quality, their ability to project knowledge ahead as they guide the structure of incoming experience. As Hertog and McLeod (2001) put it, frames are “structures of meaning made up of a number of concepts and the relations among those concepts,” (p. 140) with rules for processing new content. Frames thus come to be decked out with content, peripheral concepts, and new events, which are organized on the basis of the more central network of concepts. Frames are interesting to the extent that they form

broader patterns, but what supports those patterns? I have been more willing to assume powerful framing effects and look instead at those kinds of questions.

So, ideally framing provides a “bridging” model. But with the growing popularity of the concept, I have been sent more manuscripts to review than I care to recall, with many having only the term “framing” in common. Authors often give an obligatory nod to the literature before proceeding to do whatever they were going to do in the first place. In addition, I have worked with a number of doctoral students in our program and abroad, many of whom find in framing a more compelling hook to hang their content analyses on. Often, it is simply a matter of substituting “frame” for what would have been called “topic” or “theme.” If they cannot show how the frame does more “organizing” and “structuring” work, I prefer they not use the label.

As much as I have encouraged qualitative efforts, I have also seen the difficulty in teaching the method to those who do not share all of my linguistic and cultural backgrounds; it is challenging to link up frames with broader cultural elements and often easier to carry out a less culture-bound content analysis. On the quantitative side, students often have a unit-of-analysis problem, finding the most appropriate textual elements to count and sort. It may be a function of a journalism-oriented program, but they often want to go article by article, classifying them into one frame category or another. Tankard’s (2001) list of frames approach is often appealing because it promises empirical clarity. But because the “list” must be winnowed down sharply in the process of finding consensually codable frames that can be assigned to stories, the texture is often lost to data reduction. On the qualitative side, authors often insert large block-quotes of texts in the manuscript and lightly describe what the text is “about.” It amounts to quoting examples, with little attempt to analyze or cluster the excerpts around any particular argument. The quantitatively inclined may think that in framing they have found a way around the need to define reliable coding measures, and the qualitatively oriented may welcome the ability to dress up with a theoretical term what amounts to a series of article summaries.

It has been particularly interesting to see the attempts made to subsume framing under the agenda-setting umbrella. This turf battle is ironic, because I would view framing as in part a reaction against the theoretical limitations of its neighbor. This theoretical poaching is aided by a strong tendency in framing research to define the object too strictly as manifest content, captured in salience, and agenda setting works on the transfer of salience. As Entman (1993) defines it:

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them *more salient* in a communicating text, *in such a way as to promote* a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation. (italics added) (p. 52)

McCombs restricts it further, focusing strictly on the appearance or not of various framing “attributes” of issue “objects” (e.g., McCombs & Ghanem, 2001). The advantage in precisely locating the unit of analysis is traded off in restricted

interpretive ability. Scholars can certainly establish a matrix of objects and attributes that compares the media array of saliences with corresponding saliences in the minds of the public. And I am willing to accept that there will generally be a strong association between these two sides, but it does not account for the more dynamic “organizing” ability of frames. Even the psychologically oriented review by Scheufele (2004) faults second-level agenda setting for dealing with attributes singularly and not regarding frames as configurations of attributes.

News stories must select certain aspects of reality and emphasize them, but Entman’s definition begs the question of how they are organized “in such a way as to promote” their effects. It is precisely *the way* that certain attributes come to be associated with particular issues that should concern framing analysis. It has been a major step forward in the empirical tradition to appreciate that there are features that, when taken together, tell a larger tale than the manifest story. The framing project opens up more room for interpretation, captures a more dynamic process of negotiating meaning, and highlights the relationships within discourse.

The “war on terror” is a rich current framing case, perhaps the most important of our time, and illustrates some of the challenges for research. References to the “so-called” war on terror or bracketing in quotation marks point to this reflexive awareness among many writers, and many of its elements have already been examined in the popular press. This partial awareness has not prevented the frame from being widely accepted as a way of thinking about the “post-9/11” world. But in its prominence its workings may have become taken for granted.

It has proven extremely difficult for any political actors to advance a compelling counterframe to the “war on terror.” Indeed, even administration critics have been obliged to accept the phrase in saying that the president has “undermined the war on terror,” or that others would prosecute it more effectively. The military leadership itself has chafed under the global war on terror frame, with some arguing that it puts them in a no-win position, lacking strategic clarity. Nevertheless, it has been institutionalized as a way of looking at the world, with far-reaching ramifications for U.S. policy. The war on terror has been elevated to a macro-framework that comes closer to ideology. That is, political debate takes place largely within the boundaries set by the frame with general acceptance of the assumptions built into it. It is easy to move from describing the administration’s “war on terrorism” to considering how things are going in “America’s war on terror.”

This macroframe requires that analysis go beyond specific issue cultures, especially those advanced by individual social movements. Some “issues”—like abortion, for example—can certainly be presented within clearly competing frames (prolife vs. prochoice) and are “functional” frames in the sense that they lay out actionable policy. These different positions, are in turn, well known to journalists who become mindful of the “spin” various labels give. Entman (2003), for example, even though ostensibly considering the “war on terror” frame, proceeds to identify the president’s more narrow “problem solution” focus within it as war with Iraq. This he contrasts with the “counterframing” of the issue as calling instead for a war with Saudi Arabia

suggested by Seymour Hersh and Thomas Friedman. But the War on Terror is not so easily linked with one sponsor, nor easily confined to one action position. These specific political opinions should not be equated with the more embracing frame within which they operate.

As we tackle challenging questions like these, we should consider the War on Terror's ability to organize such a large swath of political action, and it may not lie in sheer emphasis. An infrequent but taken-for-granted use of the phrase may signal more deep-level structure even as it continues to find more related concepts with which to join. It may also be renegotiated over time because policy actors find that they cannot escape the basic terminology but can redefine some of its meaning. This means being alert to how resources from the host culture are being appropriated by a variety of actors and sponsors and examining structures of meaning—the ways they are communicated, and the social and media structures that support them. As research goes forward on important issues like this, I hope we can clearly define how we are using our terms and fit them in creative ways to the questions, even if that means crossing a few bridges and being open to neighboring perspectives within the framing project.

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