

Framing

Contrary to the central concept of rational choice theory (people always strive to make the most rational choices possible), Framing theory suggests that how something is presented (the “frame”) influences the choices people make.

Frames are abstract notions that serve to organize or structure social meanings. Frames influence the perception of the audience. Frames are cognitive shortcuts that people use to help make sense of complex information. Frames help us to interpret the world around us and represent that world to others. They help us organize complex phenomena into coherent, understandable categories. Frames provide meaning through selective simplification, by filtering people's perceptions and providing them with a field of vision for a problem.

In the English language, the word "frame" can be used both as a verb (to frame) or as a noun (a frame). As a noun, *frame* denotes the boundary within which the whole picture is displayed (similar to a frame placed around a picture or painting), and is used as a tool for interpreting and understanding the perceptions and underlying objectives of the various actors in the conflict. As a verb, *framing* refers to the creation of frames, either from a simple reading of the situation or through a deliberative, analytic, or strategic process.

Framing is a quality of communication that leads others to accept one meaning over another. It is the process by which a communication source defines and constructs an issue or controversy.

Because issues are often complicated, and require the processing of a great deal of information from a variety of perspectives, frames provide a shorthand understanding of a situation, by focusing only on those features deemed important by the particular individual involved. Frames are therefore interpretive devices that all people use when making sense of the world around them. They aid us in making the difficult task of processing complex and often cumbersome information about our social world much simpler, by focusing our attention only on certain features that we feel are important.

All individuals use frames to aid in deciding where and how we fit into the issue and what, if anything, we can do in response. Just as a picture frame is used to create a border around a painting or photograph to crop out unimportant features of the image, an issue frame is used by individuals to crop out particular features of the issue, and to highlight what they feel is important.

This process of emphasizing certain features of the issue by cropping or downplaying less prominent features allows the most important information to be filtered out from the large pile of information surrounding the dispute. However, different people see certain dimensions of issues in very different ways. What may be of primary importance to one stakeholder may not be important at all to another. Though framing provides a shorthand filtering of essential information, it also can generate conflicts through differing interpretations of a dispute, and disagreements over the importance of its component parts.

Framing is not per se a bad thing and in fact is an unavoidable part of human communication. We find it in the media as events are presented within a field of meaning. We find it in politics as politicians attempt to characterize events as one thing or another; we find it in religion, and we find it in negotiating when one side tries to move another towards a desired outcome.

According to Fairhurst & Sarr (1996) framing consists of three elements: Language, Thought, and Forethought.

Language helps us to remember information and acts to transform the way in which we view situations. To use language, people must have thought and reflected on their own interpretive frameworks and those of others.

Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) described the following Framing Techniques:

- **Metaphor:** To give an idea or program a new meaning by comparing it to something else.
- **Stories** (myths and legends): To frame a subject by anecdote in a vivid and memorable way.
- **Traditions** (rites, rituals and ceremonies): To pattern and define an organization at regular time increments to confirm and reproduce organizational values.
- **Slogans, jargon and catchphrases:** To frame a subject in a memorable and familiar fashion.
- **Artifacts:** To illuminate corporate values through physical vestiges (sometimes in a way language cannot).
- **Contrast:** To describe a subject in terms of what it is not.
- **Spin:** to talk about a concept so as to give it a positive or negative connotation.

Framing is a useful tool for analysis, because it allows us to view the particular frames that people use when examining a particular issue. If we come to understand the various frames that individuals use to distinguish important from unimportant information, then we can achieve a better understanding of why people take the positions that they do, and we can learn about how and why people respond as they do when interpreting a particular situation.

Media Framing

The premiere framing institution of our time, the American media dramatically shapes the way we view current issues. As early as 1920, a scientist named Lippman proposed that the media would control public opinion by focusing attention on selected issues

while ignoring others. Known as the “agenda-setting” hypothesis, the idea that people were easily susceptible to media influence was soon derided as an overly simplistic misperception of the viewing audience.

Through most of this century, media pundits claimed that the public wasn’t susceptible to simple “hypodermic” injections from the media (and you can still hear this defense put forward by today’s media moguls). But the agenda-setting hypothesis has been revisited recently by scientists like Krosnick & Miller (1996), who have traced surges and declines in presidential popularity to media contextualizing.

In 1991, the gulf war dominated media coverage, pushing Bush’s approval ratings to 90% after the war--*the* highest rating in American history. A short 12 months later, Bush was defeated at the polls. How could one of the most popular presidents in American history lose a subsequent election? There was no publicised scandal, no political gaffe, no international blunder that could explain Bush’s misfortunes.

Media personalities often explain national changes in mood by denigrating the fickle, mindless American public. Remember when Dan Rather attributed the 1994 Republican wins to a public that threw a “tantrum”? But a fickle, mindless public isn’t the answer either. The answer to national mood swings appears to be psychological rather than logical. Seemingly inconsequential changes in issue presentation have been shown to cause dramatic shifts in public preference.

Researchers Krosnick & Brannon (1993) used national survey data to answer this very question. During 1992, the media refocused its attentions from the war to the national economy. Based on sophisticated statistical analyses, Krosnick & Brannon demonstrated that this media refocus largely accounted for Bush’s declining popularity in 1992.

Because of this and similar research, many media experts are once again viewing the public as passive recipients of “hypodermic” media injections. Yeah, that’s right: people are told what to think by the media. And the vast majority of people obediently think as they’re told. It’s just human nature--who has the time or the energy to sort out all the issues one’s self? The media does this for us. It offers us safe, often comforting opinions that appear to be the consensus of the nation. (The internet is a chink in the armor.)

Communications scientist Robert Entman (1993) states that “Journalists may follow the rules for objective reporting and yet convey a dominant framing of the news that prevents most audience members from making a balanced assessment of a situation.”

This requires that we ask a fundamental question: if media elites can effectively shape public opinion by emphasizing certain issues and ignoring others, what is the nature of a modern, media-dominated democracy?

Does public opinion reside in the minds of citizens, or is public opinion manufactured elsewhere and then merely deposited in the minds of citizens?

Entman thinks that attempting to determine the public's 'true' opinion is often a futile effort, since opinions can be as easily manufactured as they can be measured.

Strategic Communications Terms Regarding Framing

- **Strategic Frame Analysis:** A model uniting the social and cognitive sciences that seeks to identify the dominant frames of how the public understands issues and the dynamic role that the media plays in creating and activating particular frames. Frank Gilliam, Professor and Director of the Center for Communications and Community, and Susan Nall Bales, President of the FrameWorks Institute, have found that when contradictions arise between dominant negative frames in the media and personal experience, most Americans resolve the contradiction by judging their own experience to be exceptional rather than challenging media stereotypes.

The core argument of strategic frame analysis is that how issues are framed-both in the public mind and the mass media-has a measurable impact on public discourse. This is significant because how people think about issues influences policy outcomes.

- **Framing:** refers to how messages are encoded with meaning so that they can be efficiently interpreted in relationship to existing beliefs or ideas.
- **Media Framing:** Media framing is the process by which an issue is portrayed in the news media. Media frames provide boundaries around a news story and determine what is and is not newsworthy or notable. Journalists rely on media frames to decide what to include in a story and what to leave out, a process that may be conscious, instinctive or culture-bound. Just as a picture frame may draw attention to certain details and relegate other elements to the background, a media frame may draw a viewer's attention to specific parts of a journalist's news story, de-emphasize other parts, and leave out some aspects completely.
- **Media Framing and Youth:** When applied to issues affecting children and youth, the way news is framed-the visuals, symbols, inference and language-can trigger two pictures:(1) one picture is of self-absorbed, potentially violent, amoral teenagers; and (2) the other picture is of inexperienced junior adults experimenting with identity in order to assume their role in the community. This act of framing can predispose policymakers and voters to prioritize the allocation of public resources in different ways. In this case, voters may choose prisons over education and volunteer programs.
- **Gregory Bateson:** Anthropologist who first used the term "frame" in 1955 to refer to two key aspects of communication: (1) Frames are cognitive models that allow a person to interpret and evaluate a message (i.e., understanding what a "family" is). In Bateson's case, the cognitive models that particularly interest anthropologists are cultural understandings, those that are shared, durable, and

have motivational force. (2) Frames are "metacommunications" or messages about messages. For instance, if one news media story refers to government programs as "handouts", this brings to mind cultural models of laziness but not of suffering. Both of Bateson's senses of "frame" are key to strategic frame analysis.

Most Americans now rely on news reports to learn about public issues. Increasingly, the real world for most Americans is viewed through the lens of the news media. Therefore, how the news media frame public issues is critical to final resolution of public problems.

- **Framing and the News Media:** The news media generally use two main frames: episodic and thematic. The episodic news frame is the predominant frame on television newscasts that depicts public issues in terms of concrete instances. Episodic news frames focus on discrete events that involve individuals located at specific places and at specific times (e.g., nightly crime reports). Episodic news frames are used about 80 percent of the time in newscasts. Thematic news frames, used about 20 percent of the time, are news frames that place public issues in a broader context by focusing on general conditions or outcomes (e.g., reports on poverty trends in the U.S.).

Researchers have shown that the type of news frame used has a profound effect on the way in which individuals attribute responsibility. Stanford University political scientist Shanto Iyengar concludes:

The use of either the episodic or the thematic news frame affects how individuals assign responsibility for political issues; ...episodic framing tends to elicit individualistic rather than societal attributions of responsibility while thematic framing has the opposite effect. Since television news is heavily episodic, its effect is generally to induce attributions of responsibility to individual victims or perpetrators rather than to broad societal forces (Iyengar, 1991).

- **Agenda-Setting:** The role played by mass communication media in establishing the salient issues and images to which the public reacts. Agenda setting is a process by which issue proponents work to gain the attention of media professionals, the public and public policy makers. Communications research provides evidence that the news media are the primary agenda-setting agents. An issue that is covered by the news media will set the agenda for how the public reacts as measured in public opinion polls and how policy makers will respond through legislation.
- Agenda setting also refers to the ability that the media have to not only reflect reality but also determine reality. The media determine reality by how much attention they pay to any particular issue. For instance, if the news media "cover" violent crime extensively, the public and policy makers will respond accordingly, with fears of being victimized, despite real world risk of violent crime having dropped.

- **Agenda-Setting Theory:** States that the menu of news and other information made available to the public by media decision-makers ultimately defines what is considered significant. The question for researchers then arises as to how agenda setting influences the importance subsequently attached to the images and events presented by the media. Donald L. Shaw and Maxwell E. McCombs observed in *The Emergence of American Political Issues: The Agenda-Setting Function of the Press* (1977) that:

Considerable evidence has accumulated that editors and broadcasters play an important part in shaping our social reality as they go about their day-to-day task of choosing and displaying the news.... This impact of the mass media—the ability to affect cognitive change among individuals, to structure their thinking—has been labeled the agenda-setting function of mass communication. Here may lie the most important effect of mass communication, its ability to mentally order and organize the world for us. In short, the mass media may not be successful in telling us what to think, but they are stunningly successful in telling us what to think about.

- **Media Framing and Advocacy:** is of particular importance to media advocates because these frames help news consumers decide who or what is responsible for the cause and/or solution of a problem. A media advocate may try to reframe issues that emphasize the broader social factors and institutional accountability involved in an issue, not just personal responsibility. Media Framing and Race: A vivid example of media framing effects is provided by the literature on crime, race, and the news. Researchers have identified a pattern of crime news reporting that contains two striking regularities: crime is violent and criminal perpetrators are nonwhite. As Robert M. Entman, co-author of *The Black Image in the White Mind*, notes:

TV news, especially local news, paints a picture of Blacks as violent and threatening toward whites, self-interested and demanding of the body politic continually causing or being victimized by problems that seem endless.

- **One Event: Three Frames, Three Solutions**—Charlotte Ryan, author of *Prime Time Activism*, offers a good example of how one event can be framed in many ways, with a profound impact on the event's meaning. Consider the following three different versions of one news story:
 1. "An infant left sleeping in his crib was bitten repeatedly by rats while his 16-year-old mother went to cash her welfare check."
 2. "An eight-month-old South End boy was treated yesterday after being bitten by rats while sleeping in his crib. Tenants said that repeated requests for extermination had been ignored by the landlord. He claimed that the tenants did not properly dispose of their garbage."

3. "Rats bit eight-month old Michael Burns five times yesterday as he napped in his crib. Burns is the latest victim of a rat epidemic plaguing inner-city neighborhoods. A Public Health Department spokesperson explained that federal and state cutbacks forced short-staffing at rat control and housing inspection programs."

Each version of the story represents a different frame—in other words, each has a distinct definition of the issue, of who is responsible, and of how the issue might be resolved. The first version, by emphasizing the age and actions of the mother (leaving her baby to cash a welfare check), suggests that the problem is irresponsible teens having babies. The solution would be reforming welfare to discourage or punish such irresponsible behavior. Most articles about low-income people use the first version news story frame. It illustrates a news story that is episodic in its approach to a specific problem. In version two, the issue is a landlord-tenant dispute about responsibility for garbage. The solution depends on the reader's perspective: either stronger enforcement of laws related to a landlord's responsibilities, or laws that would make it easier for a landlord to evict irresponsible tenants. Only the third version really gets into larger issues about the impact of funding cuts on basic services in low-income communities. It illustrates a news story that is thematic in its approach to a specific problem.