

Framing Theory

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Framing does not have a single definition which is agreed upon and used by most scholars (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). There is a large variety of definitions of what a news frame is in both theoretical and empirical contributions. Conceptually, we define news frames as “a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them. The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 143). In short, a news frame can affect an individual by stressing certain aspects of reality and pushing others into the background—it has a selective function. In this way, certain issue attributes, judgments, and decisions are suggested.

Historical origins

Framing is a concept that is widely used in the social and behavioral sciences. In communication science, framing is prominent within health communication, news and journalism research, and in particular in political communication research. The origins of framing as it is used in political communication research today can be traced back to both the sociological and the psychological literature.

In the sociological tradition, the work by Erving Goffman is essential. Goffman takes the starting point that frames are useful devices for human beings to make sense of the world in all kinds of everyday situations. For him, frames are culturally bound and serve to reduce the complexity of our everyday world. The work inspired by this line of reasoning has tended to focus on macro processes. In the psychological tradition, the work by Kahneman and Tversky (1984) is typically named as a starting point. They developed prospect theory, which suggests that new information is evaluated very differently depending on whether a gain or a loss frame is applied to it. Research based on prospect theory is often focused on micro processes.

In political communication research, ideas from both traditions and approaches have carried over. Work by Tuchman and Gitlin is clearly more aligned with the sociological perspective, while much of the later framing effects literature (see below) has a psychologically oriented foundation. The framing notion was also picked up by for example Entman (1993), who transferred framing to the study of the mass and news media in particular. At the core of the news framing research stands the quest to understand and explain why “(often small) changes in the presentation of an issue or an event produce (sometimes larger) changes of opinion” or other outcome variables (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 104). As a result, news framing has become ubiquitous in political

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communication research, with several hundreds of publications devoted to or making use of the concept.

Definitions, typologies, and operationalizations

De Vreese (summarized in de Vreese, 2005) suggested a general distinction with reference to the nature and content of a news frame. Certain frames are pertinent only to specific issues or events. Such frames may be labeled *issue-specific frames*. So far, studies of issue-specific news frames have looked at the framing of the health care, the Internet, labor disputes, or biotechnology (see de Vreese & Lecheler, 2012 for an overview). Other frames transcend thematic limitations and can be identified in relation to different topics, some even over time and in different cultural contexts. These frames can be labeled *generic frames*. An issue-specific approach to the study of news frames allows for a profound level of specificity and detail relevant to the event or issue under investigation. This advantage, however, is potentially an inherent disadvantage as well. A high degree of issue-sensitivity makes analyses drawing on issue-specific frames difficult to generalize, compare, and use as empirical evidence for theory-building. Some of the most commonly identified generic frames are the “conflict,” “human interest,” “attribution of responsibility,” “morality,” and “economic consequences” frames (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000), strategy game frames (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997) as well as “episodic” versus “thematic” frames (Iyengar, 1991).

Research that tries to detect news frames in texts, such as political news, often relies on an *inductive* approach and refrains from analyzing news stories with a priori defined news frames in mind. Frames emerge from the material during the course of analysis. An inductive approach produces rich knowledge about the framing of the issue at hand, but makes it hard to extrapolate and replicate the findings. A second approach is *deductive* in nature and investigates frames that are defined and operationalized prior to the investigation.

A fundamental question for framing research is where the frame is in a text, what are the textual (or visual) components carrying the frame? Cappella and Jamieson (1997) suggest that considering *any* production feature of verbal or visual texts as a candidate for news frames is too broad. They suggest four criteria that a frame must meet. First, a news frame must have identifiable conceptual and linguistic characteristics. Second, it should be commonly observed in journalistic practice. Third, it must be possible to distinguish the frame reliably from other frames. Fourth, a frame must have representational validity (that is be recognized by others) and not be merely a figment of a researcher’s imagination (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997, pp. 47, 89).

In an often-cited definition of framing, Entman (1993, p. 52) suggested that frames in the news can be examined and identified by “the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments.” Gamson and Modigliani (1989) identify “framing devices” that condense information and offer a “media package” of an issue. They identify (1) metaphors, (2) exemplars, (3) catch-phrases, (4) depictions, and (5) visual images as framing devices.

With research from different disciplines we can also observe a difference between framing studies employing either *equivalency* or *emphasis* frames (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Equivalency frames refer to logically alike content, which is presented or phrased differently. Emphasis frames are closer to “real” journalistic news coverage and present “qualitatively different yet potentially relevant considerations” (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 114). The concept of equivalency stems from the series of “Asian disease” studies by Kahneman and Tversky’s (1984) prospect theory described above. Although their framing manipulation — altering the wording of a scenario outlining the consequences of a fatal illness — was appropriate to explore the psychological process, this definition of framing is rather narrow. Indeed simple question-wording differences that reverse information such as those studied by Kahneman and Tversky are not easily compatible with more complex communicative situations and politics.

Finally, some frames carry a specific *valence*. In framing research, valence remains slightly underdiscussed, potentially because the reference to “positive” or “negative” media messages touches on a different domain of media effects research, namely persuasion research. Yet, valence is central to the original study of framing by Kahneman and Tversky (1984). Valenced news frames have the capacity to affect *support* for an issue, while neutral frames may only affect issue *interpretation*.

What is clear from extant research is that framing is a process that involves multiple actors. Scheufele (1999) distinguished between media frames and audience frames. Several scholars have emphasized that frames, either in media content or held by audiences, are the outcomes of interactive and dynamic processes. Taking a starting point in media frames, these processes are dubbed frame-building (the process that leads to the media frame) or frame-setting (the process that underlies the effects of frames). In the following, the antecedents of frames and the effects of frames are discussed.

Antecedents of frames

How frames come into existence is a crucial but understudied phenomenon. The *frame-building* process takes place as a continuous interaction between journalists and nonmedia actors. So far, there is only little systematic information available on this relationship, simply because researchers have mainly focused on investigating frames in the news rather than the frame-building process (Scheufele, 1999). However, some authors have attempted to describe and classify the variables that determine news framing. These studies draw on the multitude of studies that describe how journalistic work is influenced by individual, social, organizational, or structural factors that surround them.

For instance, de Vreese (2005) distinguishes between *internal* and *external* factors of frame-building within the news room. Internal factors are editorial policies and news values, which shape the day-to-day work of journalists. For example, the news value of focusing on domestic consequences can translate into a journalist framing a story about an international event in terms of domestic economic ramifications. Equally, the human interest news value often translates into a story about an event being centered on a specific individual. External factors are influences from elites, interest groups, and

social movements. Elite influence becomes apparent when journalists use parts of political speeches or “soundbites” to illustrate an issue. Scheufele argues that journalists are most likely to adapt elite framing, when the issue at stake is “relatively new” on the media agenda. The idea of elite influence on the news framing process alludes to a widely discussed assumption in political research, namely that political attitudes and opinions in citizens are so volatile and susceptible to elite messages that subtle changes in the news media or political speech can lead to rather large effects on these attitudes and opinions. That said, there is only little systematic information available on how news frames actually emerge.

Effects of frames

News frames have been shown to affect citizens’ sense-making on a variety of political issues. Framing effects studies look at the effects of frames on issue interpretations, cognitive complexity, public opinion and issue support, and voter mobilization (see de Vreese & Lecheler, 2012 for an overview). Some studies of framing show that news frames affect information processing, that is, how citizens integrate framed information into their mental stockpile and how they “understand” a political issue (e.g., Price, Tewksbury, & Powers, 1997). Other studies, in fact the majority, measure framing effects on attitudes or opinions toward a specific issue (e.g., Chong & Druckman, 2007). Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson (1997) in an often-cited study present a model of news framing effects on opinion, where the framing process is defined by lending additional weight to an already accessible concept. Behavioral framing studies focus on campaigns and the effects of news frames on voter mobilization or turnout (e.g., Valentino, Beckmann, & Buhr, 2001). Recent studies focus on the effects of news framing on distinct emotions toward a political issue as a new dependent variable of interest to political communication research.

Moderators of framing effects

Framing effects do not appear to be equally strong for all individuals at all times in relation to all issues. Research has focused on features that have the potential to enhance, limit, or even obliterate framing effects. Thus far, the literature presents a number of *individual*-level moderator variables (such as knowledge) as well as *contextual* moderators such as source characteristics and interpersonal communication, attempting to bring the study of framing effects closer to “real life.” At the individual level the evidence is divided and one group of scholars finds *less* knowledgeable individuals more susceptible to framing effects, whereas a second group argues the opposite. On a contextual level, framing effects may depend on the issue that is being framed. For example, Iyengar (1991) differentiates between episodic and thematic framing and finds that framing effects vary according to the particular issue at stake. However, he does not offer conclusive evidence on the conditions under which issue characteristics matter.

Mediators of framing effects

Research has also focused on the underlying psychological processes through which framing effects take place. This is typically dubbed mediation. Three basic processes are likely to mediate framing effects: (1) accessibility change, (2) belief importance change, and (3) belief content change (Slothuus, 2008). *Accessibility change* as an intermediary mechanism is hypothesized to function by making considerations in the individual's mind more salient and therefore more likely to be used when forming an opinion. *Belief importance change* is thought to be the most significant mediator of framing effects (e.g., Nelson et al., 1997). It refers to framing as "altering the *weight* of particular considerations" in the individual's mind (Nelson et al., 1997, p. 236, italics in original). Thus, frames do not render certain frame-related beliefs more salient, but increase the weight that is assigned to those beliefs. As an intermediary, important considerations, in turn, are more likely to be incorporated into subsequent judgments. Recently, scholars have turned to a third complementary explanation for framing effects: *belief content change* (e.g., Slothuus, 2008). A belief content model refers to the addition of new beliefs to an individual's set and alludes to one of the most established mechanisms in media effects research—the persuasive effect. Belief content change had previously been disregarded in framing effects, because it was argued that framing "operate by activating information *already at the recipients' disposal*, stored in long-term memory" (Nelson et al., 1997, p. 225). However, political news frames often cover information that is remote and complex to the individual, and may therefore regularly convey importance change, *as well as* new information to the individual. Slothuus (2008, p. 7) proposes a "dual-process" model of framing effects that combines belief importance and belief content change. Results of his experimental study show that frames do indeed affect opinion via both proposed mechanisms, with belief content change being more significant for individuals of low political knowledge (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2012). Another plausible mediator of framing effects is emotional response to frame exposure. Recent studies have shown that, if a news frame causes distinct emotional reactions (e.g., feeling angry or happy), then these emotions often mediate framing effects on issue opinions. Furthermore, existing studies indicate that frames that do trigger emotional response are also likely to be more powerful than those that do not.

Duration of framing effects

A fundamental question in framing effects research is how long a framing effect lasts. Only recently have framing scholars actually begun to include duration into their studies (e.g., de Vreese, 2005). With a small number of studies, knowledge and data regarding the rate of decay of framing effects after initial exposure and measurement is evolving slowly (see de Vreese & Lecheler, 2012). Tracing the effects of media messages over time is of course not a novel idea, and a consistent line of studies in learning, persuasion, or agenda-setting effects research have included time as a significant variable in their designs. Some studies find that framing effects can last several weeks whereas others find that they dissipate rather quickly. Whatever the rate of decay of

framing effects over time may be, it is likely to vary from individual to individual (see section on moderators above). In the most general sense, duration is likely to depend on the knowledge structure of the individual concerning the issue at stake. News framing effects are likely to be most persistent if the individual has enough knowledge of a (political) issue to comprehend the frame, but not enough knowledge so as to reject the frame based on solidified previous attitudes. In this sense, those with moderate political knowledge are likely to be influenced by news frames the longest.

Effects of repetitive and competitive framing

Framing studies often take a rather microscopic view of the influence of news frames on how citizens make sense of politics, and have therefore measured the effects of only *one* frame at a time. However, in political discourse, citizens are likely to be exposed to repetitive or competitive news messages over time, and the outcome of these two is likely to vary. Framing research is thus venturing into a more realistic setting that adheres to the dynamics of day-to-day news use. In this respect, research has yet to deliver a satisfying theoretical account of the role of news framing *within* politics, where the dynamics of argumentation, dispute, and consensus are the order of the day.

A number of political communication scholars argue that *repetitive news framing* leads to a higher and more constant level of accessibility, which in turn increases the applicability of a framed message. So far, research cannot offer a full account of the specific effects of repetitive framing, be it in terms of magnitude or process. *Competitive news framing* has received quite some attention in framing literature. Most studies focus on the effects of competitive framing when two competing frames are presented at the same time. For instance, when adding an additional frame it was found that competitive framing increases the influence of personal beliefs in the process, and decreases the effects of news. Yet, much research is still needed to exactly determine *how* conflicting messages in a dynamic communications flow affect opinion formation and other outcome variables.

Future research

With many of the fundamental questions in framing research yet unresolved, there is a lot of work for research ahead to arrive at more detailed and conclusive answers to questions that can be seen as “core business” in framing research.

Types of frames

A first question pertains to the definition and operationalization of frames. While the plethora of studies using different definitions has provided several interesting insights, it is doubtful how many additional studies looking at the framing of a random issue are needed. To move the field forward studies are needed that distill framing patterns and identify frames comparatively, be it across issues, media, culture, and/or time.

Visual frames

Political communication researchers have often expressed the idea that visuals are powerful elements of news. Seminal work by scholars such as Doris Graber and later Elizabeth Grabe have demonstrated this. Framing research is only at the beginning of integrating visual components into the understanding of frames and framing effects.

Journalistic news frames

A key question in political communication concerns the autonomy of journalism. Whether journalists only engage marginally in the framing processes when confronted with strong elite-driven advocacy frames or not is an unresolved question. Some level of journalistic interventionism seems logical in the broader context of research and theorizing about mediatization. This literature highlights the centrality of the media and also the importance of the media in making choices about the contents of news. As Gamson and Modigliani (1989) put it, what journalists *do* to topics that their sources focus upon, or that are generated by other means (e.g., acts of nature), become a story's "organizing principle," or frame.

Underlying processes

As evident above, framing effects follow multiple routes. In addition to the three cognitive processes already identified it is an open question how these relate to each other and what the potential role of emotions is in this process. The emotional underpinnings of political attitudes is a hot topic in current research. An emerging body of research demonstrates that different types of frames may lead to affective responses (see above). Some of these follow specific cognitive processes, depending on predispositions of the individual. Emotions are thus treated as dependent variables of information processing, and the inherent emotional quality of news coverage is neglected. Other studies presume that emotions must be an important mediator between frames in communication and their effects. Existing studies point out the lack of a systematic account of the role of emotions in framing research, be it as a dependent, a moderator, or as a mediator variable. Framing research is well served by wandering down this research avenue and investigating, for example, when cognitive or emotional routes of processing dominate, or which normative implications emotions and framing have for deliberation, learning, and understanding politics.

Dynamics of frames and effects

Framing effects do not take place in a vacuum. Two sorts of dynamics are particularly important for framing research to consider. On the one hand there is a question of how long framing effects last and on the other there is a related question about what happens when frames are repeated or challenged (see above). Thus far, a number of individual and contextual moderator variables of framing have been identified (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Research has yet to determine which characteristics play a role

over time, but answering the fundamental questions of how long framing effects last, under which conditions, and for whom should be high on the framing research agenda. Alongside these questions are also pressing questions about the effects of repetitive and competitive framing. In politics, citizens are likely to be exposed to repetitive or competitive news messages over time, and the outcome of these two is likely to vary. This might also lead to new and more intricate research designs and a further integration of new measures (see also below).

Frames and selectivity

A current key question in political communication research addresses the ability and underlying motivations for individuals to deselect political information or select only information that squares with preexisting attitudes. Framing research can benefit from entering this discussion as some frames, for example generic frames, juxtapose different types of information. Other frames, for example some issue-specific frames, on the other hand, may more readily fall into existing beliefs about certain topics.

Optimizing and innovating research designs

Framing research relies on a rich tradition of primarily experimentation but also survey- and media content-based designs. On the one hand, a number of studies use (panel) survey data and media content analyses to investigate framing, thereby increasing the external validity of the studies and emphasizing the real world relevance. On the other hand, improving experimental studies (while maintaining the obvious advantages with regard to determining cause and effect, and for disentangling the complex processes that account for the effect) is an alternative strategy, used and advocated by others.

The reliance on survey data and media content analyses is by no means new, but research has (thankfully!) moved on from using self-reported measures of media use in cross-sectional surveys to claim media, including framing, effects. Studies are increasingly relying on a combination between panel survey data with media use measures and content survey data, and the integration of actual media content into the media use variables in the panel survey data, thereby creating an improved, weighted measure for exposure to specific media content and frames.

SEE ALSO: Journalism, Political; Media Effects Theory; Public Opinion

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