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## Framing

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*Frames are seen as patterns of interpretation through which people classify information in order to handle it efficiently.*

—Dietram Scheufele (2004), p. 402

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Each day, we as news consumers are bombarded with stories from news media—television, newspapers, magazines, the Internet, mobile phones—and we form attitudes and opinions and make judgments based in part on the information we consume. In the agenda-setting chapter, we learned that mass media have the power to set our issue agendas, or tell us what to think about, and they also have the power, through the way they put together stories with words and images, to *frame* that information in such a way that can actually affect the way we think.

In recent years, media effects researchers have turned their attention to the power of the way information is put together or framed, and the effects that it has in the minds of media consumers. You will recall from the agenda-setting chapter that “attribute” agenda setting focuses on the media not only telling viewers what to think *about* but also telling them what to think. This type of research has developed into an entirely new area, called **framing**, that some media effects scholars believe should be distinguished from agenda-setting research and priming research both theoretically and experimentally.

This chapter examines the theory of framing, the effects of framing, frame-building and frame-setting approaches, and types of frames. Then we take a look at relevant recent research in framing.

## Framing Theory

Framing theory finds its roots in the fields of psychology and sociology. Psychologically oriented research typically has featured micro-level studies of individuals, whereas sociologically oriented research has generated macro-level studies of society.

According to Tewksbury and Scheufele (2009), the psychological perspective of framing comes from Sherif’s (1967) work on “frames of reference,” and from prospect theory (Kahneman, 2003; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979, 1984). Individuals make judgments and perceive the world within certain frames of reference, and these frames of reference can be set up in such a way to impact individual judgments and perceptions. *Prospect theory* expands this idea by noting that perceptions are dependent upon the point of reference of the information that is being given. In other words, framing a message in different ways will result in different interpretations.

The sociological approaches to framing are drawn from attribution theory (Heider, 1959; Heider & Simmel, 1944) and frame analysis (Goffman, 1974). *Attribution theory* states that people simplify their perceptions of social reality by making judgments about what causes others to act in particular ways. They attribute the actions they observe to either personal, social, or environmental factors (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009). In *frame analysis theory*, people do not simply attribute the cause of actions, but they rely on socially shared meanings to categorize information into “schemas” (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009, p. 18) or “primary frameworks” (Goffman, 1974, p. 24) in their minds.

## Effects of Framing

Framing can result in several types of effects, including having an impact on knowledge, persuasion, or agenda setting. “At their most powerful, frames invite people to think about an issue in particular ways” (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009, p. 19).

For example, if a news story contains information on an issue that has never been covered before, people will learn the facts about that issue from the presentation. If people already have set ideas about a particular issue that the news covers, the manner in which a story is framed may cause them to rethink that issue or react in some way to the information that is being presented. In some cases, the information is framed in such a way that the audience member is persuaded to a particular point of view. In the agenda-setting chapter, we learned that coverage of certain issues by news media set the agenda for the public, or made those issues salient in the minds of the audiences. Framing theorists distinguish framing effects from agenda-setting effects by pointing out that framing goes beyond the mere accessibility of particular issues in the news by inviting audience members to apply the information or ideas in particular ways.

The basis of a psychological difference between agenda setting and framing, therefore, lies in this accessibility/applicability distinction. Ironically, perhaps the best way to conceive of the difference between the two is to recognize that accessibility and applicability go hand-in-hand in everyday information processing. (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009, p. 21)

Framing researchers have found evidence for both accessibility and applicability as important processes in framing effects.

Framing researchers also distinguish framing studies from persuasion studies because some framing studies focus on the origin or evolution of news frames. Persuasion studies involve the presentation of persuasive information that audiences usually recognize as having persuasive appeal. Framing studies usually deal with news presented by journalists who are supposed to be objective in their presentations, and audiences usually do not suspect that the information may be persuasive or at least influences the way they perceive certain issues.

Another important difference between persuasion research and framing research is the effects that are measured. Persuasion researchers try to measure changes in *attitudes* due to exposure to persuasive messages. Framing researchers seek to discover audience *interpretations* of news information (Tewksbury et al., 2000).

Using a study cited in the chapter on priming can serve to demonstrate framing effects at work. Simon and Jerit's 2007 study found that people exposed to a news story about a new abortion procedure were affected by the way the story was framed. When presented with a news story that referred to the fetus as a "baby," people were more likely to support regulation of the new abortion procedure. Those presented with a news story that used the terms "fetus" and "baby" equally in the story also experienced these framing effects. Audiences who read the "fetus"-only story were significantly more likely *not* to express support for regulation of the procedure.

## Frame Building and Frame Setting

Framing studies come in two types. The first includes studies that examine the way frames are put together by news professionals. These studies are included under the heading of "frame building." The second type is comprised of studies that examine the effects on audiences from news frames. These are referred to as "frame-setting" studies.

### Frame Building

Studies that examine frame building focus on the way frames are constructed—by journalists, by politicians, and by culture. Issues come to be framed in a particular manner because of the way elites present the information, or the way the media present the information in line with events and popular culture (Scheufele & Nisbet, 2007).

Research on framing by journalists has identified five factors that can influence how journalists frame the information they present (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009). Journalists may be influenced by

- societal norms and values
- the pressure and constraint of news organizations
- pressures from interest groups or policy makers
- their professional routines
- each journalist's own political orientation or ideology (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Tuchman, 1978)

The elite in society—interest groups, politicians, government agencies—routinely attempt to frame issues that the media cover (Scheufele, 1999; Gamson & Modigliani, 1987; Miller, Andsager, & Riechart, 1998; Nisbet, Brossard, & Kroepsch, 2003; Nisbet & Hume, 2006). Research has shown that the elite are sometimes successful (Andsager, 2000) but at other times are not (Miller et al., 1998) in influencing journalists on the way issues are framed.

The surrounding culture also plays a part in the way journalists frame issues. Journalists are a part of the culture in which they work, and their stories reflect that culture. Because of this, frames "often are unnoticed and implicit, their impact is by stealth" (Van Gorp, 2007, p. 63). For example, the cultural movement to separate church and state matters in this country has been taken seriously by journalists, who do not frame stories from a religious standpoint.

### Frame Setting

Frames can influence individuals to make connections in their minds that can result in four outcomes—defining the issue, determining the causes for an issue, noting the implications for an issue, and the treatment of an issue (Entman, 1993; Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009).

A frame can wield its influence cognitively—in the way the individual thinks about an issue, or affectively—the way the person feels about an issue. It all depends on the way a story is constructed, whether it focuses on conflicts among elite policy makers, the results of certain policy changes on individuals, or stirs the emotions of individuals by focusing on a human interest angle (Price, Tewksbury, & Powers, 1997).

In one study, researchers presented individuals with two identical stories, except the stories had different lead (or beginning) sentences and different headlines. One story's headline and lead paragraph favored the economic benefits of large farms that raised hogs, whereas the other story pointed out serious environmental concerns with such farms. The way the story was framed significantly affected individuals' opinions on large hog farms, and the effect remained weeks after the people read the stories. The ones who read about the economic benefits of the farms showed support for the farms, and those who read about the environmental problems associated with the farms were significantly less likely to support them (Tewksbury et al., 2000).

Such research makes it clear that journalists need to take seriously their duty to present all sides of an issue and not focus on only one aspect. It also demonstrates the power that reporters have to influence the public in the way they frame stories.

Another study tested tolerance for a Ku Klux Klan rally by presenting individuals with stories framed in different ways. The people who read articles that framed the rally in terms of free speech were significantly more tolerant when asked about Klan speeches and rallies (Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997) than were those who read articles that framed the rally in terms of racism.

Studies also have shown that individual differences among audience members affect the power of the framed information. People with particular beliefs and attitudes or “schema” on a particular topic tend to accept new information on the topic more than those without such existing schemas (Rhee, 1997; Shen, 2004). People react differently to news stories, depending upon their personal knowledge, experiences, and attitudes. For example, someone who has suffered with asthma for many years would accept information about new treatment options for the condition. They would attend to the information and possibly store the information based on their existing schema.

Research has shown that frames can have effects on attitudes—either formation of attitudes or change of attitudes (Nelson & Oxley, 1999; Brewer, 2002)—and sometimes on behaviors (Valentino, Beckmann, & Buhr, 2001; Boyle et al., 2006).

Most studies of framing effects have focused on short-term evaluations, and for that reason they resemble priming studies. Framing theorists point out that the best way to show that people apply the information they learn in frames is through longitudinal research (Price & Tewksbury, 1997; Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009). These studies test for applicability of the frame weeks or months after exposure, and therefore differ from priming studies.

## as of Frames

Researchers have tended to test for specific types of frames in audience reactions. “This includes sets of frames, such as gains vs. loss frames [i.e., losses that hurt more than gains feel good] (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), episodic vs. thematic frames [i.e., *episodic* in that news is reported in terms of a specific event or a typical case, versus *thematic*, in which news is reported within a more general context] (Iyengar, 1991), strategy vs. issue frames (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), or human interest, conflict, and economic consequences frames (Price et al., 1997)” (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009, p. 28).

Tewksbury and Scheufele (2009) pointed out that this practice has a limiting effect on framing research, in that it ignores the possibility of “master frames” (Snow & Benford, 1992) or frames that might exist in the culture that could apply across issues.

## Recent Research in Framing

As stated previously, some framing studies are concerned with the way messages are framed by news media (frame building) and others are more concerned with the effects those frames have on audiences (frame setting). In one frame-building study, researchers examined the *Washington Post's* coverage of the Abu Ghraib prison incident that involved abuse of Iraqi prisoners by U.S.

### Research Spotlight

#### Abuse, Torture, Frames, and the *Washington Post*

Douglas V. Porpora, Alexander Nikolaev, and Julia Hagemann (2010)

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In this study, the researchers provided evidence that disputed findings that other researchers had published in a journal article and a book regarding news frames in the *Washington Post* that related to the Abu Ghraib incident. The earlier study had contended that the newspaper had framed the mistreatment of prisoners in the same manner as the Bush administration; that is, as “a few bad apples” and averted blame to higher authorities or administration policy.

#### Method

Straight news stories and opinion pieces regarding Abu Ghraib in the *Washington Post* were examined from April 1 through August 31, 2004. They coded the straight news stories for the presence of two types of slants: (1) the mistreatment was neither systematic nor widespread but the work of a few (“bad apples”) and (2) higher level responsibility. The title and first three paragraphs of the news stories were examined.

With opinion pieces, the researchers coded for the placement of the words *abuse* and *torture*, or whether the words did not appear. Opinion pieces were also coded for whether the piece defended the mistreatment as the work of a few (supported the Bush administration’s framing of the incident) or charged the administration with responsibility and accused the administration of lying.

#### Findings

The most frequent frame found in the headlines and first three paragraphs of the news stories was for higher-level responsibility for the incident. This was found in 44% of the straight news pieces. The “bad apples” frame was suggested in less than 12% of the pieces. In examining headlines alone, 63 of them (26%) suggested higher responsibility for the incident (counterframing of the administration view) as opposed to 12 (5%) that suggested the prisoner abuse was the result of a few bad apples.

As time passed, the counterframing in the *Post* grew stronger. Coverage of the incident fell off in July, but it resumed in mid-August, when half the headlines implicated higher responsibility in comparison with only one that suggested a few bad apples.

In opinion pieces, only three opinion pieces (out of 56) supported the bad apples defense, whereas 85% of the pieces implicated that high levels of command, including the administration, should be held accountable. The “bad apples” frame of the administration was explicitly rejected in 44% of the opinion pieces examined.

The researchers concluded that the earlier study, which had coded for instances of the words *abuse* and *torture*, had not delved deeply enough into the content of the *Washington Post* during the period of investigation. Counterframes to the administration’s view were present and abundant.

military personnel. Previous studies (Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2006, 2007) had suggested that the newspaper accepted the Bush administration's framing of the incident as an isolated instance of wrongdoing perpetrated by a few bad individuals and did not suggest that administration policy had anything to do with the scandal. In a content analysis of the *Post*, Porpora, Nikolaev, and Hagemann (2010) found evidence to the contrary. They said that the newspaper did engage in counterframing measures.

Another frame-building study focused on the framing of two conflicts in the Middle East covered by *The New York Times*. The researchers found that the experience of the reporters involved affected the depth of the coverage and framing of the stories. A conflict in one location was covered by a veteran *Times* correspondent, whereas the other conflict was covered primarily by local journalists. "Thus, in both cases, *NY Times'* framing cast the armies' actions against the militants in unambiguous moral terms, as either pointless destruction or justified and decisive. Interestingly, in both cases, the assessments were soon proven incorrect" (Evans, 2010, p. 224).

Entman (2010) studied news frames of Sarah Palin during the 2008 presidential election campaign. He found evidence of slanted framing and expanded framing theory to include systematic studies of bias in news reporting. "Slanted framing results from the interaction of real world developments, cultural norms, and journalistic decision rules with the sometimes proficient and other times maladroit efforts of competing elites to manage the news" (p. 389).

Other frame-building studies have examined media framing of illegal immigration (Kim, Carvalho, Davis, & Mullins, 2011), of nonverbal actions in the 2008 Democratic primary (Manusov & Harvey, 2011), of news related to energy



Some candidates, such as 2008 vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin, allegedly are framed negatively in the news media. Steve Broer/shutterstock.com

conservation in the United States (Bolsen, 2011), of the long conflict between BP and Greenpeace (Garcia, 2011), of U.S. media coverage of terrorism since 9/11 (Powell, 2011), and of how opinion page and editorial writers discussed the subprime mortgage crisis in terms of racial aspects (Squires, 2011).

A study that involved frame-building and frame-setting effects conducted by Slothuus (2010) involved a natural experiment using data from the 2005 Danish National Election Study. The study showed how people reacted toward the Social Democrats in Denmark when the group suddenly changed its stance on early retirement benefits. The way the Social Democrats framed the issue, at first, was in terms of assisting workers. When a new party leader took over, the issue was framed as an economic one—the growing number of retirees meant the benefit system needed reforms for economic reasons. The data from the survey revealed that the shift in framing of the issue increased public support overall for an abolishment of the early retirement benefits, but the policy support changed more for respondents who identified themselves as Social Democrats than as affiliates of other political parties (Slothuus, 2010).

Other frame-setting studies have been conducted on public support for Turkey joining the European Union (de Vreese, Boomgaarden, & Semetko, 2011), on viewer evaluations of Sarah Palin's vice presidential debate performance following negative framing of Palin by the media (McKinney, Rill, & Watson, 2011), and on the attribution of blame in the Hurricane Katrina aftermath in terms of news images and race (Ben-Porath & Shaker, 2010).

## Summary

In recent years, media effects researchers have turned their attention to the power of the way information is put together or framed, and the effects that it has in the minds of media consumers. Framing research can be distinguished from agenda-setting research and priming research both theoretically and experimentally.

Framing theory finds its roots in the fields of psychology and sociology. Studies are distinguished between micro-level studies of individuals (psychology) and macro-level studies of society (sociology).

Framing can result in several types of effects, including knowledge, persuasion, or agenda setting. Framing studies usually deal with news created by journalists who are supposed to be objective in their presentations, and audiences usually do not suspect that the information may be persuading them or at least influencing the way they perceive certain issues.

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