



Encyclopedia of Communication Theory

Framing Theory

Contributors: Ingrid Volkmer

Edited by: Stephen W. Littlejohn & Karen A. Foss

Book Title: Encyclopedia of Communication Theory

Chapter Title: "Framing Theory"

Pub. Date: 2009

Access Date: September 26, 2018

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks

Print ISBN: 9781412959377

Online ISBN: 9781412959384

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412959384.n151>

Print pages: 408-409

©2009 SAGE Publications, Inc.. All Rights Reserved.

This PDF has been generated from SAGE Knowledge. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

Framing theory aims to identify schemes in which individuals perceive the world. The roots of framing theory are often attributed to the sociologist Erving Goffman who argued that interpretive designs constitute central elements of cultural belief systems. Goffman called these interpretive designs frames that we use in our day-to-day experience to make sense of the world. Frames help to reduce the complexity of information, but serve as a two-way process: Frames help interpret and reconstruct reality. Goffman's concept of frames has its conceptual roots in phenomenology, a philosophical approach that argues that the meaning of the world is perceived by individuals based on their lifeworld beliefs, experiences, and knowledge. Whereas traditionally, world meanings were conveyed through socialization processes, creating a collective reality within a culture or society, today so-called mediated communication delivers powerful frames of world perception that challenges and renegotiates these lifeworld experiences.

Not surprising, then, is that framing theory has become important for a variety of sectors within today's transnational media society. Knowledge about framing theory is crucial for the planning of media campaigns in advertising, public relations, and political sectors. Framing theory is, for example, utilized by spin doctors for the tailoring of a political issue in election campaigns for a specific audience. However, one of the important areas of framing theory is media research in journalism and political communication. As media maintain a fourth estate role in democratic societies, media researchers find framing theory helpful to analyze the imbalances and underlying power structures that mediate political issues. For example, the frame of a story about the environment can be quite different in conservative or liberal media outlets. However, the use of framing theory not only identifies the difference framings of one story across a number of news outlets, but allows us to detect journalistic bias. The use of stereotypical framing, frames along gender lines, or imbalances of the representation of relevant societal communities, such as ethnic minorities within a national or transnational public, are examples of different frames that might be used.

Framing theory emerged in the mass media age of the 1970s. In the United States, this was a time when media research moved away from a unidimensional media-effects model and began to address quite specific forms of media influence on audiences. Among other issues, media research began to address the powerful role of national mass media in shaping political issues within the national public. As audiences were exposed to continuous information streams, it became obvious that media not only influence audiences during election campaigns, but powerfully create world perceptions and political discourse. As Benjamin Cohen argued, although media are not especially effective at telling us what to think, they do tell us what to think about.

During the 1970s, a variety of studies began to further investigate this important distinction. Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw developed the agenda-setting approach that claims that there is a relation between the amount of coverage of a certain political issue and the perceived relevance of this issue among the audience's political agenda. An example for this phenomenon is the coverage of humanitarian crises in national media in the United States and the subsequent relevance of this issue among audiences (which has then, in consequence, formed foreign policy initiatives in the United States).

In addition to such an agenda-setting process, framing theory studies the different schemes in which these issues are told. Early studies in framing research identified key frames in television news: an episodic frame—definition of a particular event frame—and a thematic frame, which positions an issue in a wider context of public discourse. Others have addressed

frames being used in election campaigns.

More recently, framing theory has been conceptually refined. More recent research addresses specific sets of frames, such as those around elite discourses because many news stories favor the perspective of the powerful societal stakeholders. Others have focused on slant or content frames that identify ways in which framing favors one side over the other in a dispute. Another type of framing research addresses the underlying social processes of frame building. Some theorists have repositioned framing within the terrain of other research methodologies in political communication and argue that framing consists of a macro-level and microlevel component. Whereas the macrolevel relates to modes of presentation and overlaps with agenda setting, the microlevel relates to the way the audience uses this information as they develop attitudes toward certain issues that overlap with priming processes. Priming refers to the way media offer a prior context by which an audience will interpret subsequent information, thus creating frames of reference for audiences.

In the early 20th century, Walter Lippman, a journalist and writer, noted in his book *Public Opinion* that the world is perceived through stereotypes that serve as pictures in our heads. As the mass media age, as news stories delivered through a small number of national television channels influenced national audiences and as media transformed into a networked media world where individuals actively select information, framing theory needs to be repositioned. Lippman's notion of individual worldviews seem to determine more than ever which information channels are being used. In this sense, framing theory needs to include the individual as an actor within the framing process. More recent approaches to framing theory highlight these social constructions of frames. In these debates, frames are viewed as organizing principles that structure the social world. However, much more needs to be done to reposition this important concept of public discourse in today's networked information culture.

IngridVolkmer

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412959384.n151>

See also

- [Agenda-Setting Theory](#)
- [Audience Theories](#)
- [Broadcasting Theories](#)
- [Journalism and Theories of the Press](#)
- [Media and Mass Communication Theories](#)
- [Media Effects Theories](#)
- [Political Communication Theories](#)
- [Public Opinion Theories](#)
- [Social Interaction Theories](#)
- [Spiral Models of Media Effects](#)

Further Readings

Cohen, B.(1963).The press and foreign policy.Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Entman, R. M.Framing bias: Media in the distribution of power.Journal of Communication57(2007).163–173.<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2006.00336.x>

Goffman, E.(1974).Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience.Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Iyengar, S.(1991).Is anyone responsible? How television frames political issues.Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lippman, W.(1922).Public opinion.New York: Macmillan.

McCombs, M. E., and Shaw, D. L. The agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36(1972). 176–187. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/267990>

Reese, S. (2001). Framing public life: A bridging model for media research. In S. Reese, O. Gandy, & A. Grant (Eds.), *Framing public life* (pp. 7–31). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Scheufele, D. A. Framing as a theory of media effects. *Journal of Communication* 49(1999). 103–122. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1999.tb02784.x>