THE STATE OF FRAMING RESEARCH: A CALL FOR NEW DIRECTIONS

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1. The State of Framing Research in Political Communication

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The concept of framing embodies a context-sensitive explanation for shifts in political beliefs and attitudes. Framing defines a dynamic, circumstantially-bound process of opinion formation in which the prevailing modes of presentation in elite rhetoric and news media coverage shape mass opinion (Iyengar 1991; Scheufele 1999). This definition stands in stark contrast to other models of opinion formation that explain attitudes on specific issues or events as a function of longstanding and stable political predispositions (Campell et al. 1960; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948), of persuasive messaging (O'Keefe 2002), or of learning, information processing and other cognitive processes (Brossard, Lewenstein, and Bonney 2005; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). As a result, framing effects refer to behavioral or attitudinal outcomes that are not due to differences in *what* is being communicated, but rather to variations in *how* a given piece of information is being presented (or framed) in public discourse.

In spite of its rather narrow conceptual definition, communication researchers have become infatuated with the framing concept. Today, virtually every volume of the major

journals features at least one paper on media frames and framing effects. If we sample from the pages of *Political Communication* and *Journal of Communication*, the increased prominence of the concept is clear: These two journals published a total of 15 papers on framing between 1990 and 1999, but 38 between 2000 and 2009. What accounts for the popularity of the framing paradigm, and does the recent surge in scholarly interest signal an advance in our understanding of political communication?

The purpose of this chapter is to sound a cautionary note. Current communications research on framing has largely abandoned the more rigorous (and narrow) definition of frames derived from psychology - frames as informationally equivalent labels – in favor of a much looser definition – stemming from work in sociology – that blurs the distinction between frames and other informational or persuasive features of messages. The upshot is a state of conceptual confusion whereby any attribute of information is treated as a frame and any response from the audience is deemed a framing effect. From this perspective, framing cannot be distinguished from other forms of media or social influence such as agenda setting, learning or persuasion (Scheufele 2000; Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007).

We divide this chapter into three parts. After an introductory overview of the concept, we explore two of the most common conceptual misunderstandings related to framing and their implications for political communication research. This includes a conceptual overview of the different approaches to framing in political communication research, and of the relationship between framing and related effects models, such as priming and

agenda setting. Finally, we conclude with a recommendation that framing research be redirected away from confounded emphasis frames towards equivalence frames in the original framing tradition by expanding the sample of potential frames to include non-verbal visual cues. Specifically, current technology makes it possible to implement precise manipulations of designated attributes of images. In this sense, the use of non-verbal frames makes it possible to return to the original tradition of framing research.

2. Framing fallacies: What framing is and what it is not

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As we discussed earlier, framing effects refer to communication effects that are not due to differences in *what* is being communicated, but rather to variations in *how* a given piece of information is being presented (or framed) in public discourse. Given its interdisciplinary roots in sociology (Gamson and Modigliani 1987, 1989; Goffman 1974), psychology (Kahneman 2003a; Kahneman and Tversky 1979, 1984) and linguistics (Lakoff and Johnson 1981), framing research has been characterized by significant levels of conceptual obliqueness and sometimes even fallacious reasoning (Scheufele 1999). In order to help develop a clearer conceptual understanding of what framing is (and is not), it is necessary to first discuss two fallacies underlying a significant portion of the work that is currently being done under the "framing" label in our field.

2.1. Equivalence vs. Emphasis Frames

Framing research is often traced back to two largely unrelated traditions of thinking. The first emanates from research conducted by the psychologists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman (Kahneman and Tversky 1979, 1984) in which the term "framing" was used to describe subtle differences in the definition of choice alternatives. Subjects in these experiments were provided choices that were identical in their expected value, but which differed in the terms used to describe the choice options (e.g. a fixed probability of "winning" or "losing" some amount of money).

Tversky and Kahneman demonstrated that human choice was contingent on the description of choice problems. When presented with outcomes defined as potential gains, people showed risk aversion and chose the more certain payoff. But when the identical outcome was defined in terms that suggested potential losses instead of gains, people became risk-seekers and preferred the outcome with the less certain payoff (for an overview, see Kahneman 2003a).

This perspective on framing is dependent on the assumption that all "[p]erception is reference dependent" (Kahneman 2003a, 459). In other words, how we interpret information differs depending on how that information is contextualized or framed. The effect is particularly pronounced for ambiguous stimuli, i.e., pieces of information that are open to multiple interpretations. A good example is the "broken-B" stimulus used by psychologists Jerome Bruner and Leigh Minturn in the 1950s (Bruner and Minturn 1955). It refers to a symbol that an observer could interpret as the number "13" or as a "B" with a slightly detached upright line. Bruner and Minturn showed the symbol to

subjects after they had been exposed to a sequence of letters for the first experimental condition and a sequence of numbers for the second one, and found clear differences between the two groups in how they interpreted the ambiguous broken-B stimulus.

These psychological approaches to framing are based on two assumptions. The first assumption states that framing refers to differential modes of presentation for the exact same piece of information. The information that is being presented, as a result, is informationally equivalent across different frames. This tradition of framing research can therefore also be labeled “equivalence framing.”

The second assumption is that framing – at least if tested in experimental designs – often leads to what Kahneman calls “complete suppression of ambiguity in conscious perception” (Kahneman 2003b, 1454). In other words, participants interpret the stimulus in line with the context in which it is framed in the particular experimental condition, but have no reason to assume that it could also be seen differently if framed in an alternative way. This assumption, of course, is somewhat artificial, and does not take into account the complexity of everyday communication environments, where attitude formation is likely driven by an interplay of complementary or competing frames. Some scholars have therefore begun to investigate the simultaneous effects of competing or complementary frames by giving participants more than one perspective on the target phenomenon. These studies typically utilize longitudinal designs in which study participants are either exposed synchronously (at a single point in time) or repeatedly (e.g., Chong and Druckman 2007, 2010). The evidence from this emerging

literature suggests that the magnitude of framing effects depends not only on the number of frames encountered, but also on the information-processing strategies of the receivers (Druckman and Bolsen forthcoming).

The concern about the lack of ecological validity of single-equivalence-frame studies is also addressed by a large body of framing research rooted in the social movements and general sociology literature (Ferree et al. 2002; Gamson 1992; Gamson and Modigliani 1987, 1989). Many of these researchers approach framing as a macro-level or meso-level, rather than an individual-level phenomenon, and offer fairly broad and all-encompassing definitions of framing.

Gamson (1992), for example, conceptualizes framing very broadly as the relationship between ideas and symbols used in public discourse and the meaning that people construct around political issues. Frames emerge in public discourse in part as an outcome of journalistic routines that allow them to quickly identify and classify information and "to package it for efficient relay to their audiences" (Gitlin 1980, 7). Probably the most widely-cited and also all-encompassing definition of framing was provided by Gamson and Modigliani (1987) who see frames as "a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events ... The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue" (p. 143).

Unfortunately, the great majority of framing studies rely heavily on this sociologically-oriented tradition and converge on a relatively loose definition of framing as information

that conveys differing perspectives on some event or issue. This tradition can also be labeled “emphasis” framing, since the observed framing effects represent differences in opinion that cannot be attributed exclusively to differences in presentation. Emphasis-based frames not only vary the perspective or underlying dimension for considering an event (e.g. freedom of speech in the case of some particular dissenting group), but they also differ in several other respects. Thus, the widespread adoption of the emphasis over the equivalence mode of framing makes it much more difficult to observe framing effects per se. Frames have morphed into messages, and the prevalence of emphasis framing in our field threatens to make the broader framing concept redundant as a theory of media effects. And the problem is not trivial since it indicates an unintentional regression toward old media effects paradigms under the guise of conceptual refinement.

2.2. Framing, priming, and agenda setting: Distinguishing framing from related concepts

The confounding of equivalence frames with content elements has also been promoted by a second key fallacy underlying a substantial number of studies in this area: the difference between salience-based effects, such as priming and agenda setting, and applicability effects, such as framing (Scheufele 2004; Scheufele 2000; Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007; Tewksbury and Scheufele 2009).

The term agenda setting usually refers to the transfer of salience from mass media to audiences. The original model posits that if a particular issue is covered more

frequently or prominently in news outlets audiences are also more likely to attribute importance to the issue. In their seminal study, McCombs and Shaw (1972) operationalized issue salience among audience members as judgments about the perceived importance of issues. Later studies replaced perceptions of importance with terms such as salience, awareness, attention, or concern (Edelstein 1993).

Priming can in many ways be seen as a logical extension of agenda setting processes. The concept is usually traced back to work on spreading activation theory in psychology. Psychologists Allan M. Collins and Elizabeth F. Loftus, for example, explain priming as the process that occurs after a construct is presented as highly salient to audiences: “When a concept is primed, activation tags are spread by tracing an expanding set of links in the network” (Collins and Loftus 1975, 409). Or to put it differently, if media coverage makes an issue more salient in people’s minds, this issue is also more likely to be used as one of “the standards by which governments, policies and candidates for public office are judged” (Iyengar and Kinder 1987, 63).

Agenda setting and priming, as salience-based effects, are often grouped with framing. And historically, there are good reasons for discussing the three effects models together. They all mark a transition away from media effects theories, such as the Spiral of Silence (Noelle-Neumann 1973, 1974) or Cultivation (Gerbner and Gross 1974), that hypothesize unidirectional and unmediated media effects on various perceptual and behavioral outcomes. Agenda setting, priming, and framing do not

necessarily predict less powerful effects overall, but they focus much more explicitly on the cognitive processes linking media stimuli to audience responses (Scheufele 2000).

In spite of often being grouped together, however, agenda setting, priming, and framing outline effects models that are also based on clearly distinguishable theoretical premises. We will discuss these distinctions in greater detail below. In spite of these differences, however, some scholars have proposed to merge the three into a single conceptual framework. McCombs (McCombs 1992, 8-9), for example, argues for conceptualization of framing as an agenda setting effect:

> "Agenda-setting is about more than issue or object salience. The news not only tells us what to think about; it also tells us how to think about it. Both the selection of topics for the news agenda and the selection of frames for stories about those topics are powerful agenda-setting roles and awesome ethical responsibilities."

Many of these efforts to subsume agenda setting, priming and framing under a single conceptual model were motivated by one of the earlier definitions of framing developed in political communication that explicitly referred to news selection and salience as the theoretical underpinnings of framing:

> "Framing essentially involves selection and salience. 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 for the item described." (Entman 1993, 52)

Entman's early work on framing (Entman 1991, 1993) had a powerful catalytic effect on our field by setting the stage for numerous studies on framing over the course of the next 30 years. But its all-encompassing definition of framing also helped set the stage for a conceptual vagueness surrounding the concept of framing that is still lingering in many studies on the topic today. And some of Entman's early empirical work on the framing of two airline disasters is a good example. Under the label "framing," Entman examined how many pages *Time* and *Newsweek*, for instance devoted to each of the two disasters. Operationally, these measures of "framing," as Entman defines it, overlap significantly with the measures used by early agenda setting researchers to tap issue hierarchies in the media agenda (Funkhouser 1973a, 1973b; McCombs and Shaw 1972). In other words, many of these first attempts to operationalize frames were interchangeable with measures of the media agenda.

And the field of political communication has taken a long time to recover from some of these early imprecisions in definition. In fact, since the early 1990s we saw the literature on framing, priming, and agenda setting splitting off into two main schools of thought. A first group of researchers – trained mostly in the McCombs/UT Austin tradition (McCombs 2004; McCombs and Shaw 1972, 1993) – sees all three theoretical models as fundamentally related to the central concept of agenda setting and the

salience-based explanations underlying it. Mass media, they argue, influence audience perceptions by highlighting the importance of issues (first level agenda setting) or issue attributes (second level agenda setting, which they see as equivalent to framing). This school of thought echoes Iyengar and Kinder's (1987) conceptualization of priming as an outcome of agenda setting, but also subsumes framing as an equivalent to second level agenda setting.

This approach has been criticized on both conceptual and empirical grounds and a number of researchers have argued for a return to a more specific equivalency-based definition of framing (Scheufele 2000; Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007; Tewksbury and Scheufele 2009). Expanding on Iyengar's (1991) seminal work on the framing of political messages, this second school of thought typically defines framing as only encompassing media effects that are due to variations in the mode of presentation for a given piece of information. Media effects that are an outcome of messages that present different facts, aspects of an issue or even arguments do not fall under the framing label.

Scholars in this second school of thought also argue that the theoretical premises underlying framing, on the one hand, and agenda setting and priming, on the other hand, are distinctly different (Price and Tewksbury 1997). And the different premises underlying each model are critically important for steering future research in each respective area (Scheufele 2000).

2.3. Theoretical underpinnings – And why they matter

Part of the confusion about (a) equivalence and emphasis based frames and (b) conceptual overlaps between framing and other cognitive effects models stems from the fact that researchers have paid limited attention to the historical and theoretical foundations of each concept, i.e., the assumptions that help explain the mechanisms behind each of the three effects models.

As outlined earlier, agenda setting and priming are accessibility-based effects (Iyengar 1990). Media coverage can influence perceptions of salience among lay audiences, either for particular issues (Funkhouser 1973a, 1973b) or attributes of issues (Kim, Scheufele, and Shanahan 2002). Increased salience means that relevant nodes in the minds of audience members get activated and that this activation spreads to related concepts (Collins and Loftus 1975). As a result, these sets of nodes are more accessible and therefore retrievable from memory when we have to make decisions about candidates or policy choices (Zaller 1992; Zaller and Feldman 1992) and are more likely to influence our attitudes and evaluations (Iyengar 1991).

Framing, on the other hand, is what Price and Tewksbury (1997) have called an applicability effect. Its earliest foundations can be seen in work on Gestaltpsychologie (Wertheimer 1925) in the first half of the last century and subsequent thinking in attribution theory (Heider 1978). Both areas of research dealt with human tendencies

to make sense of seemingly unrelated pieces of information by detecting underlying patterns that were consistent with pre-existing schemas in their minds.

The idea of applicability implicitly draws on this intellectual tradition and assumes that the effects of particular frames are strengthened or weakened, depending on how applicable they are to a particular cognitive schema. In other words, the mode of presentation of a given piece of information (i.e., frame), makes it more or less likely for that information to be processed using a particular schema. The applicability model is directly consistent with Bruner and Minturn's (1955) broken B experiment, as outlined earlier. If presented (or framed) in a sequence of numbers, the stimulus is more likely to be processed as a number, as opposed to a letter, if presented in the context of other letters.

And these differential theoretical underpinnings of accessibility and applicability effects have important implications for our understanding of the mechanisms behind agenda setting, priming, and framing. In particular, they suggest that accessibility effects operate fairly universally across audiences. This is not to say that political sophistication or levels of pre-existing knowledge on the issue may not moderate agenda setting or priming effects. In fact, some of the seminal work on the topic already suggested that they do (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). But based on the underlying theoretical assumptions, an issue can be primed or made salient among mass audiences, even if they have never heard about it before.

Applicability models, in contrast, assume that effects, such as framing, are contingent or at least variant in strength, depending on an audience member's pre-existing schema(s). As a result, the mode of presentation of a message or piece of information will be significantly more likely to have an impact if it resonates (or is applicable) to an audiences member's mental schemas. If the relevant schema does not exist at all among audience members, framing effects are unlikely to occur.

Unfortunately, most work on framing, agenda setting, and priming to date has provided few empirical insights into this distinction between schema-independent effects, such as agenda setting and priming, and schema-dependent effects, such as equivalence framing. This has produced three collateral outcomes which all pose major challenges for our field in the future.

First, the theoretical underpinnings of each model help us clearly delineate the mechanism that each effects theory is concerned with. While magic bullet or hypodermic needle approaches before WW II were focused mostly on persuasive communication, i.e., telling people what to think and believe, agenda setting explicitly rejected this idea of direct persuasion and instead focused on media's more subtle role in telling people what information to think about (Cohen 1963). Framing – in contrast – is not concerned with either persuasion or agenda setting, but instead addresses how people make sense of information that they have received, i.e., which mental "shelf" they put the new information on.

Second, schemas are culturally shared. As a result, tests of framing effects within a given culture are unlikely to produce applicability effects that are as strong as effects that could be observed in cross-cultural comparisons. For instance, the broken B stimulus discussed earlier, will only produce framing effects for audiences that are familiar with the Roman alphabet and Arabic numerals. In politics, habitual offender legislation in the U.S. is a good real-world example. Almost half of all U.S. states have legislation that requires courts to hand down mandatory prison sentences to people who have been convicted of serious offenses on at least three occasions. These laws are often framed as "three strikes laws." This frame resonates with audiences that are familiar with the rules of baseball. It makes very little sense, however, in cultures, such as Germany, where a vast majority of citizens has virtually no knowledge of baseball and are therefore lacking the cognitive schema necessary to be susceptible to the "three strikes" frame. As a result, future research will have to examine much more carefully how variations in schemas across cultures can shape the outcomes of communication. A recent comparison among monocultural and multicultural individuals in Asia and the U.S., for instance, suggests that there are in fact systematic variations that may provide fruitful insights fur future framing research (Fung 2010).

Third, and most importantly, the growing focus on emphasis rather than equivalence frames in the recent literature has likely masked any schema-dependent effects. As we discussed earlier, frames are increasingly tested as simple persuasive effects, by blurring the distinction between frames and other informational or persuasive features of messages. Similar to agenda setting and priming, these informational or persuasive

effects are likely universal across audiences. As a result, they have little to do with the more rigorous definition of equivalence framing as a schema-dependent media effect.

3. Non-verbal frames: An argument for equivalence designs

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In this closing section, we recommend that framing research be redirected away from emphasis frames towards equivalence frames by expanding the sample of potential frames to include non-verbal, visual cues. One of the reasons scholars have come to rely on the emphasis approach to framing is the ease with which framing manipulations can be constructed. It is relatively costless to string together three or four paragraphs of text that provide different considerations concerning some underlying attitude target. But, as we have noted above, different words may convey more than differences in perspective and different individuals may "read" the same words quite differently.

One solution to the problem of semantic ambiguity is to utilize non-verbal cues as the vehicle for assessing framing effects. A picture may be worth a thousand words, but for framing research pictorial manipulations have the added value of precision. It is possible to create alternative versions of a picture that differ along a specific dimension, but which remain identical on all other observable dimensions so that any variation in the audience response can be attributable only to the manipulated dimension. In a recent series of experiments, for instance, Bailenson and his collaborators (Bailenson et al., 2008) used face morphing techniques to alter a candidate's facial resemblance to individual voters. (Their methodology requires access to a photographic database of

voters' faces and the ability to match individual faces to survey responses.) The researchers morphed a target candidate's face with either a particular respondent's face or with the face of some other respondent. For any given respondent, therefore, the candidate appeared either similar or dissimilar (see Table 1 for an example of the similarity manipulation).

[Insert Table 1 about here.]

Given the wealth of evidence suggesting that similarity is a compelling basis for attraction, Bailenson and his collaborators were able to compare the effects of facial similarity with similarity based on partisanship or policy preferences, or similarity according to group affiliation (i.e. gender or race). As expected, the effects of facial similarity were much weaker than the effects of partisan or ideological proximity, but they were significant nonetheless.

The morphing of photographs can be generalized to incorporate dimensions other than an individual's facial structure. It is also possible, for instance, to manipulate the prominence of group-based attributes associated with race or ethnicity. Social psychologists have shown that relatively prototypic Afrocentric facial features elicit more stereotypic evaluations of African-Americans than relatively ambiguous or racially neutral features (see Blair et al., 2002; Eberhardt et al., 2006). In the case of skin complexion, there is ample evidence that the darker the target non-white individual, the

more hostile the evaluations expressed by whites (for a review of the evidence, see Hochschild and Weaver, 2007).

Applying these findings concerning non-verbal racial cues to the political arena, we might expect that darkening a non-white candidate's complexion would have the effect of weakening that candidate's standing among white voters. To test this proposition, researchers presented a national sample of registered voters with relatively lighter and darker images of Senator Obama at two different stages of the 2008 campaign -- early February and late October. The metrics of the complexion manipulation were precise – the lighter and darker versions differed from the actual photograph by the exact same margin.[1] The results showed that whites' evaluations of Obama were significantly affected by skin complexion in February, but that as the campaign progressed and voters learned more about Obama, their evaluations came to be dominated by traditional cues (e.g. party affiliation and issue opinions) and were thus unaffected by the complexion manipulation (Iyengar et al., 2010).

As the facial similarity and complexion studies suggest, visual rather than semantic frames provide researchers with tight control over particular attributes of candidates. A candidate might be framed as an in-group member on the basis of race, gender, age or other physical attributes. Not only does the visual medium provide greater precision

[1] The complexion manipulations are calibrated along the brightness (V) component of the HSV color space which ranges from zero to one. Lower values of V for facial pixels indicate a darker complexion (for details, see Messing et al., 2010).

and a return to the tradition of equivalence framing, but visual stimuli are also essential ingredients of the daily stream of political information. Ever since the advent of broadcasting, non-verbal cues have become critical ingredients of political and cultural discourse. In terms of sheer size, the broadcast news audience dominates the audience for print media; non-verbal cues thus represent an ecologically valid test of framing effects on mass opinion. And a further advantage for researchers is that the non-verbal channel is especially relevant for the communication of affect. Most attitude objects in the political domain are affectively laden; non-verbal frames therefore represent a potentially more powerful means of influencing political attitudes and actions.

In conclusion, this chapter makes an argument for new “traditional” directions in framing research. Over the course of the last two decades, the researchers in political communication have approached framing with a diverse and often incompatible set of conceptual definitions. And the resulting operational confusion surrounding the construct has made drawing broader inferences across different studies all but impossible.

We are therefore making another push for more fine-grained and precise conceptual thinking in political communication about framing and related cognitive effects models. Even within the concept of framing, we urge researchers to structure future empirical work around the original characteristics of the concept, i.e., variations in the mode of

presentation of a given stimulus, rather than manipulations of the informational or persuasive nature of messages.

The potential confounds between the information itself and the way it is being presented can be illustrated using an analogy from the art world. Framing is equivalent to the choices that an art dealer or gallery owner may make about how to display a painting. Reactions among potential buyers to a painting displayed in a large, gold plated frame, for instance, will be distinctively different than they would be if the same painting was displayed in a simple aluminum frame. In other words, the art dealer can shape public reactions to the exact same painting based on fairly subtle variations in how she decides to present – or quite literally “frame” – that painting. Unfortunately, many political communication researchers have been studying paintings rather than frames over the last two decades. And not surprisingly, they found that audiences will indeed react differently to a Gaugin than they would to a Matisse. But that is an outcome of seeing two different paintings from two different artists, not two different frames.

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Table 1