

Strategic Framing

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Framing is a rhetorical tool used by communicators to delimit the scope of a situation or argument. Although *media framing* has received the extensive attention since late 1970s (→Framing Effects, Framing of News), the framing construct employed to understand communication in a wide range of disciplines—including speech, organizational behavioral, economics, political science, psychology and sociology. *Strategic framing* involves the purposeful use of this technique by rhetors, social advocates and communications professionals in fields such as public relations and advertisers. The goals of strategic framing are to telegraph meaning and to focus audience attention on particular portions of a message or aspects of a topic in order to gain favorable response.

Framing is a critical element in constructing social reality because it helps shape the perceptions and provides context for processing information. Similar to how a surrounding picture frame delimits a landscape painting, strategic communicators use message frames to create *salience* for certain elements of a topic by including and focusing attention on them while excluding other aspects.

Message framing provides *contextual cues* that bias cognitive processing and decision-making. These cues can operate at the conscious or subconscious level during the pre-attention and focal attention phases of processing by message recipients. Framing effects are mediated through the psychological process of *priming* whereby messages activate particular schemas (networks of associations and knowledge stored in memory). Strategic framing thus prompts people to think in particular, desired ways about a topic and to use only a portion of their extant knowledge stored in memory. In so doing, framing shapes inferences made about the definition, causes, and remedy of situations (Entman, 1993).

Framing has been cited as a textual, psychological or socio-political construct in more than a 1,000 citations related to the strategic use of framing. These can be categorized into a typology of seven models of framing:

Framing of Situations

Anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1972, p. 191) first defined a *psychological frame* as a “spatial and temporary bounding of a set of interactive messages” that operates as a form of metacommunication. Erving Goffman (1974, p. 21) defined a frame as a “schemata of

interpretation” that provides a context for understanding information that enables individuals to “locate, perceive, identify and label.”

Strategic framing by participants has been recognized as a critical element in the analysis of discourse, language and literary storytelling. In the context of organizational communication, strategic framing is used by managers to impose on others their version of the enacted environment in the organization operates. In negotiation research, bargaining has been examined as a process of framing and re-framing a problem, while linguistic and semantic analysis has been used to examine how problems and solutions can best be stated to the advantage of each of the parties.

Framing of Attributes

Semantic framing (i.e. the characterization of objects, events and people) is a fundamental strategy in promotional communication. Marketers, for example, have a choice of promoting ground beef as either 75% lean or 25% fat. A result can be stated as either 90% success or 10% failure. Evidence suggests that positive framing of attributes such as these almost always leads to more favorable responses.

Advertisers routinely and purposefully place frames around and captions below illustrations to call attention to particular elements of featured products. Advertisers also attempt to characterize (frame) consumer problems of being of a particular type that can be solved by a proffered solution. Research suggests that a user’s prior experience and satisfaction can be primed to link prior experience to an offer and that messages can transform how people perceive and thus justify the subsequent consumption of a product. *Product positioning* is a particularly prevalent aspect of framing where marketers focus on particular benefits of one brand versus other benefits that might be promoted by other brandmakers in the same product category (Ries & Trout, 1981).

Attribute framing also has been used by neo-classical economists to investigate decision-making. Theories of *institutional framing*, for example, suggest that focusing on issues such as fairness or being environmental friendliness shape public perceptions of organizations and impact their choices. In the arena of public issues, McCombs (2004) argues that media framing is equivalent to second-order agenda setting that prompts people to think about the *attributes* of a topic, i.e. *how* to think about a topic -- not merely *what* topics to think about (traditional or first-order agenda-setting).

Framing of Risk

The framing of potentially risky choices has been researched extensively in conjunction with *prospect theory*, which deals with the likelihood that a gain or loss will result from a decision.

Kahneman and Tversky (1979, p. 263) defined a frame as a decision maker’s perception of “the acts, outcomes and contingencies associated with a particular choice.” Prospect theory posits that people tend to avoid risks when a choice is stated in terms of gains but will take greater risks when choices are stated in terms of losses. Aversion to a hypothetical health risk was the focus of the original psychological experiments related to prospect theory. Not surprisingly, health communication practitioners subsequently have found that framing health arguments in terms of negative consequences generally is more effective than focusing on positive outcomes. Patients are willing to select greater risks if their decision means saving a life or reducing suffering.

Similar findings have been found in the domains of strategic bargaining and organizational behavior. Mediators favor bargainers who frame issues in terms of losses rather than gains, resulting in higher values of settlements. The framing of a mediator's role also influences parties' willingness to seek the greatest possible consensus. Business leaders also take greater risks to avoid losses than to seek gains.

Framing of Actions

Whereas the framing of attributes involves focusing attention on inherent qualities of an object, and the framing of risky choices involves the willingness of individuals to make choices, the framing of actions entails how to best propose actions to achieve compliance with a desired goal.

Parallel to the framing of risky choices, framing of actions in terms of negative consequences appears to be generally more effective than posing positive outcomes. For example, a university might wish to encourage students to pay tuition early in a lump sum instead of paying a slightly higher amount in installments. The university might frame the early payment option as a *discount* or the installment plan as a *penalty*. The explanations are different semantically, but the choices are the same. Some evidence suggests that this effect results because negative framing invokes more elaborative processing. On other hand, people who engage in less detailed processing or who are high in self-efficacy might actually respond better to positive framing (similar to the framing of attributes).

Framing of Issues

Framing plays a critical role in the creation and public discourse about social problems. Social constructionists argue that activists identify problematic conditions in society and frame them in ways to effect desirable social changes. Activists engage in a variety of *agenda-building* activities and use frames to mobilize support, build coalitions, manipulate symbols, make claims, typify problems, seek publicity, and gain access to the public policy agenda.

Social movements research suggests advocates engage in *frame enterprise* and *frame sponsorship*. Activists engage in *diagnostic*, *prognostic* and *motivational framing* processes and mobilize support through *frame alignment*, *bridging*, *amplification* and *extension* (Snow & Benford, 1992). Differences between competing groups result in *frame contests* (Ryan, 1991).

Related research pertaining to framing of issues has also been conducted examining topics ranging from negotiating to persuading jurors. Economists have examined the framing of fairness as a particular issue that can influence judgments on matters such as tax and income equity, willingness to pay for public goods, and social conflicts pertaining to environmental and public health risks.

Framing of Responsibility

Attribution theory examines how people ascribe causes to events. When engaged in disputes or public discussions, a common strategy for both individuals and organizations is to take credit for successes and to avoid blame for failures while ascribing blame to others. How a problem is stated dramatically biases attributions about culpability.

The causation of events can be attributed to a social actor, the object upon which the action is taken, or the environment or circumstances in which the event occurs (Kelley, 1967). Similarly, actions can be labeled (framed) as controlled or uncontrolled, internally or externally originated, or as a result or stable or unstable conditions within an individual or environment.

In most societies, citizens frame issues to portray the overall social system as fundamentally sound and prefer to attribute problems to corrupt, inept or irresponsible individuals. As a result, remedies are often focused on treatment rather than prevention or elimination of underlying systemic causes. In this same vein, news also has been criticized for excessive *personalization* of news and dependence on *episodic* versus *thematic framing* (Iyengar, 1991). Investigative news reports have been characterized as a process of *diagnostic framing* in which a story is identified as being part of a particular investigative genre and is typified as an example of a particular, well-known problem (Protess et al., 1991).

Framing of News

A final important application of strategic framing involves how groups and organizations vie for news coverage and how stories about controversies and disputes are portrayed in the media. Traditional news framing research focuses on framing as an activity of journalists grounded in their cognitive understanding of the world and their desire to arrange random events into a meaningful, organized interpretive package (Gamson, 1992; Graber, 1989; Tuchman, 1978).

From a strategic perspective, news framing also creates opportunities for groups or organizations to interpret issues or disputes from their perspective. Publicists and advocates for causes thus become *frame sponsors* seeking to have their preferred worldview presented and engaging in frame contests in the media.

Successful promotion of a particular news frame requires understanding the genres and conventions of news work, including the process of *frame selectivity* by media workers. When pitching stories to news media, for example, it is essential for strategic communicators to understand what's newsworthy and capitalizing on the culturally resonating elements of a particular story in order to make it attractive to media gatekeepers and audiences. This involves manipulating framing *devices* such as metaphors, catch phrases, exemplars, depictions, and visuals (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989).

SEE ALSO: Advertising, Agenda-Building, Agenda-Setting Effects, Attention, Attribution Processes, Construction of Reality Through the News, Framing Effects, Framing of News, Erving Goffman, Health Communication, Information Processing, Negotiating and Bargaining, News as Discourse, Positioning Theory, Priming Theory, Public Relations, Risk Communication, Risk Perceptions, Schemata, Schemata and Media Effects, Social Movements and Communication.

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