New Avenues for Framing Research

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Abstract

In this article, the author reviews the studies in this special issue of the American Behavioral Scientist. It is a strong collection of articles reporting findings from an integrated project that looks at frame building, frames, and effects of frames. The project is part of an exciting large-scale Swiss research program on democracy, NCCR. The author reflects not only on the contents of the issue but also on the framing concept in political communication research more generally. He offers suggestions for conceptual clarity and makes three recommendations about future framing research. They pertain to (a) the types of frames that framing researchers look at, (b) the dynamics of framing effects, and (c) advances in research designs in framing research.

Keywords

frames, framing, framing effects

This special issue of the American Behavioral Scientist contains a strong collection of articles. They report on research findings from an integrated project that looks at frame building, frames, and effects of frames. The project is part of one of the largest and most exciting research collaborations in the social sciences today, the Swiss-led national research program on democracy, NCCR, which is a collaboration between political scientists and communication scientists. The invitation to respond to this special issue is a welcome opportunity to reflect not only on the contents of the issue but also on the framing concept in political communication research more generally. In this article, I first make a number of observations vis-à-vis the special issue and then move on to a number of general issues in current and future framing research.

The special issue takes as a starting point that framing is a process in need of an integrated research approach. The notion that framing is a process that has most of its

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analytical power when studied as an interaction between several actors, typically in a codependent relationship, has been observed by several scholars. The model proposed in the special issue’s lead article, by Matthes (2012), has strong conceptual overlap with the observations made by Scheufele (1999) and de Vreese (2002), who also proposed an integrated process model of framing. However, only few projects proceed to empirically pursue such an integrated model of framing. What is a unique contribution of this special issue is that the different articles empirically tackle the integrated model and assess different parts of the entire model. This is a strong asset and it represents a needed step for framing research: moving beyond small-scale studies toward larger, integrated projects. Of course, there are important limitations also in this issue, with its focus on a single case, a Swiss referendum, on one topic. But nonetheless, the concerted research effort should be applauded. More specifically, given the paucity of research on, for example, frame building, the article by Hänggli and Kriesi (2012) on frame construction and frame promotion is therefore very valuable. This is a part of the framing process that is often said to be important but is rarely studied. Moreover, the use of the same frames and conceptual backdrop provides a strong linkage across the articles. This coherence makes the set of studies particularly well integrated.

The richness of the data forming the backbone of the special issue (including panel surveys and media content analyses) is another important, positive feature. It is repeatedly emphasized in the articles that framing research needs to move beyond the lab and also explore framing in the real world using nonexperimental methods (a call echoing the concerns voiced by Kinder, 2007, a few years ago in the special issue on framing in *Journal of Communication*).

### Framing: Definitions, Delineations, Differences

Taking a step back, one of the most pressing issues in framing research is the lack of conceptual clarity and operational definitions of framing and frames. The research in this special issue is inspired by Entman’s definition from 1993, which has been applied in multiple framing studies. Entman (1993, p. 52) suggests that to frame is to “select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating context.” This part of the definition is sufficiently broad to be almost nonexclusive and is in line with Gamson and Modigliani (1989), who suggest that a frame is 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” (p. 143). These definitions conceive of framing as “an emphasis in salience of certain aspects of a topic” (de Vreese, 2002, p. 4).

The research in this special issue is “inspired” by these general definitions. However, the challenge in framing research often occurs when these general definitions are translated and operationalized in the empirical studies. In the case of the special issue, frames were operationalized as “bundles of consistent issue-arguments, originally proposed by opponents or proponents” (Matthes, 2012, p. 254). It is not fully clear in all instances
what these arguments were, what they entail, and how many are required to fulfill the criterion of “bundles of consistent arguments.” As it is noted, frames such as “mass naturalization” and “people final say” roughly follow Entman’s (1993) definition. This extrapolation from microelements (the arguments) to the broader concept of frames is an important step. It touches the fundamental question of what the constituent elements of a frame are. What (which components) constitutes a frame?

Entman (1993) 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” (p. 52). Along these lines, Shah, Watts, Domke, and Fan (2002) refer to “choices about language, quotations, and relevant information” (p. 367). Gamson and Modigliani (1989) identify “framing devices” (e.g., metaphors, examples, catchphrases) that condense information and offer a “media package” of an issue. The most comprehensive empirical approach is probably offered by Tankard (2001, p. 101), who suggests a list of framing mechanisms for identifying and measuring news frames, such as headlines, photos, or quotes.

The often-cited definition by Entman (1993) continues in a way that only few studies in fact pursue. A frame, according to Entman, includes a “problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). In light of the above, it seems that not all elements are needed to speak of a frame. Not all frames, for example, contain moral evaluations or treatment recommendations, which is acknowledged in Entman, Matthes, & Pellicano’s (2009) later research. A problem definition is oftentimes the most important feature of a frame, and this can be captured in keywords or arguments. The challenge, but also the necessity, for framing research to push itself is to explicate and make transparent how these microelements are aggregated and extrapolated to constitute frames.

A lot can be said in favor of maintaining a broad and inclusive definition of frames in an initial stage of a research paradigm (D’Angelo, 2002) rather than trying to develop a golden, definitive standard definition of what a frame is. Each individual project, however, must be clear on the specifics of a frame, both conceptually and operationally. In doing so, framing research needs to acknowledge that there are different types of frames. The ones pursued in this special issue are advocacy frames, that is, frames that are brought forward by different proponents in a political debate. One of the most important conclusions of the special issue is that, in the scholars’ case study, there was remarkably little evidence of journalistic reframing and questioning of the original frames. This finding is perhaps not so surprising, because the research tool was mostly geared toward tapping the advocacy frames. Journalistic framing is often more subtle, and rather than offering an alternative frame to one proposed by a political party or nongovernmental organization, journalistic framing is more apparent in the playing-up, neglecting, or juxtaposing advocacy frames. The article by Gerth and Siegert (2012) makes this apparent with an excellent analysis of
frames but with too little space for understanding the media at work (see below concerning journalistic frames).

This distinction between advocacy frames and journalistic frames corroborates Entman’s (2004) distinction between *substantive* and *procedural frames*. Substantive frames take a starting point in the features of an issue that an actor wants to promote. Procedural frames focus on, for example, political strategies. Issue actors will tend to use the former; journalists make wide use of the latter. A second important distinction can be made between *issue-specific* and *generic frames*. Certain frames are pertinent only to specific topics or events. Such frames may be labeled *issue-specific frames*. 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* (de Vreese, 2002).

What this special issue makes clear is that although a more general definition of a frame is clear, it is important for researchers to identify the types of frames they are investigating, to include both advocacy and journalistic framing if the interactions between the two are to be studied, and to be upfront and transparent about how they move from the conceptual side of framing research to the operational side by making explicit what the constituent elements are, regardless of whether they are arguments (as in this special issue), presence or absence of specific features and contents, visuals, keywords, or otherwise.

**Three Things to Consider**

An excellent, well-integrated set of research papers as the ones included in this special issue begs for reflection on a number of pressing issues in framing research. The concept has gained in popularity in communication science (as recently highlighted by overviews such as Matthes, 2009; Borah, 2011; Vliegenthart & van Zoonen, 2011; and de Vreese & Lecheler, in press). The use of the concept also seems to branch (back) out to some of the origins of the concept, in more psychologically and more sociologically oriented traditions (see also D’Angelo, 2002). Each of these traditions addresses valuable but often different sets of questions. In the latter, issues such as different actors’ influence on each other are often central. In the former, much attention currently goes to the identification of relevant psychological mediating and moderating variables (for an overview, see de Vreese & Lecheler, in press). In the latter, the relative impact and power of different actors in the framing process are in center place. Below, I make three observations about future framing research. They pertain to (a) the types of frames that framing researchers look at, (b) the dynamics of framing effects, and (c) advances in research designs in framing research.

**Journalistic News Frames**

An overall conclusion of this special issue is that journalists exert little autonomy and engage only marginally in the framing process. Mostly, advocacy frames are used in
the news coverage. This result may seem somewhat puzzling in the broader context of current research and theorizing about mediatization, which highlights the centrality of the media and also the importance of the media in making choices about the contents of news. Why might this discrepancy be present? One reason is that the research instrument applied in the special issue is mostly geared at tapping advocacy frames rather than journalistic news frames. *Journalistic news frames* (de Vreese, 2002, 2009) are generic news frames. Journalistic production processes involve the selection of topics that are the subjects of news coverage. But beyond that, these processes play a transformative role. As Gamson and Modigliani (1989) pointed out, what journalists do to topics that their sources focus on, or that are generated by other means (e.g., acts of nature), become a story’s “organizing principle,” or frame. In this vein, Neuman, Just, and Crigler (1992) identified *human impact*, *economics*, and *conflict* as common frames used by the news media (and by audience members as well). Indeed, the journalistic imperative to frame topics and events in terms of conflict (e.g., de Vreese, 2004; Mutz & Reeves, 2005) and human interest (e.g., Price, Tewksbury, & Powers, 1997; Valkenburg, Semetko, & de Vreese, 1999) has been the subject of numerous framing studies (see also Bennett, 1996; de Vreese, Peter & Semetko, 2001; McManus, 1994; Patterson, 1993; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000).

Previous research has pointed to the distinctively high news value of stories that focus on conflict between political actors (Price, 1989). News media tend to focus on stories where there is conflict—where two sides can be pitted against one another. Thus, the presence of conflict is an essential criterion for a story to make it into the news, not only because it “sells” but also to meet professional standards of balanced reporting (e.g., Galtung & Ruge, 1965; McManus, 1994). Conflict is also inherent to politics. It is embodied in political reasoning (Lupia, McCobbins, & Popkin, 2000) and in democratic theory conflict is seen as an essential part of democratic decision making (e.g., Sartori, 1987).

The conflict frame is key in political news journalism. A major point of “framing discretion” for journalists lies in the decision of which advocacy frames to pick up on, which to neglect, and which to juxtapose within the conflict frame. The presentation of and sometimes additional emphasis on contestation is a journalistic template and one of the most important journalistic news frames. The *interplay between advocacy frames and journalistic frames* is a crucial area for future framing research to consider so as to get a broader and more inclusive understanding of the role played by advocates and journalists in the frame-building process.

**Dynamics of Frames and Effects**

An important truism about framing is that it generally does not take place in a vacuum. Two sorts of dynamics are particularly important for framing research to consider. On 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. Most extant framing effects neglect the duration framing effects
(Gaines, Kuklinski, & Quirk, 2007). Only recently have framing scholars actually begun to include duration in their studies (e.g., Chong & Druckman, n.d.; de Vreese, 2004; Lecheler, 2010; Lecheler & de Vreese, 2011, in press–b; Matthes & Schemer, in press). Tracing the effects of media messages over time is of course not new (e.g., Hovland & Weiss, 1951), but the findings in framing so far are not all that clear. One study found a weak but still significant effect of advocate frames on issue interpretation 3 weeks after initial exposure (Tewksbury et al., 2008). Conversely, Druckman and Nelson (2003) report that their issue-framing effect on opinion had dissipated 10 days after initial exposure to a frame. De Vreese (2004) also suggests that framing effects perish quickly, after only 2 weeks. Lecheler and de Vreese (in press–a) test the decay of framing effects across three delayed time points (after 1 day, 1 week, and 2 weeks) and find significant effects up to 1 week after exposure.

Whatever the rate of decay of framing effects over time may be, it is likely to vary from individual to individual. Thus far, a number of individual and contextual moderator variables of framing have already been identified (Chong & Druckman, 2007a). 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. Along 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 (Zaller, 1992). We thus also need to evaluate the “meaning” of framing effects in a more realistic setting that reflects patterns of actual news use.

A number of political communication scholars simply 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 (e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Iyengar, 1991; Price & Tewksbury, 1996; but see Chong & Druckman, 2007b). There are studies that do expose participants to a number of repetitive news frames but do not discuss how the framing effects of multiple frame exposures compare in magnitude and process to studies that had used only one news frame (e.g., Berinsky & Kinder, 2006; Valkenburg et al., 1999). Competitive news framing has been addressed by several studies (e.g., Chong & Druckman, 2007b; Hansen, 2007; Sniderman & Theriault, 2004). Most of these focus on the effects of competitive framing when two competing frames are presented at the same time. Sniderman and Theriault (2004), for example, found that competitive framing increases the influence of personal beliefs in the process and decreases the effects of news framing (see also Chong and Druckman, 2007b). In conjunction with the need to address the issue of time, the effects of repetitive and competitive framing should be high on the agenda. To illustrate this, we can make reference to two ongoing discussions: One is the previously mentioned focus in journalism on conflict frames, which is almost the embodiment of competitive framing, when advocacy frames are juxtaposed and conflicts crafted. The second is the suggestion that media environments are increasingly self-selected and homogenous (and online; e.g.,
Bennett & Iyengar, 2008), that is, prone to repetitive framing. These two discussions in the literature provide excellent and important links to framing research.

**Improving Designs**

To address issues of time (see Dynamics of Frames and Effects) and effects of different types of frames (see Journalistic News Frames) and whether these are challenged or repeated (Dynamics of Frames and Effects), framing research also needs to improve the design of its studies. Two developments take place concurrently. On one hand, a number of studies are using the strategy applied in this special issue and 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 survey 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 (e.g., de Vreese & Semetko, 2004; Schuck & de Vreese, 2009). The latter strategy is also used in this special issue and is an important positive feature of these studies.

However, the call for increased realism and external validity should not come at the expense of the (sophisticated) experimental design. “Experimental realism” (McDermott, 2002, p. 333) can be obtained in clever framing experiments: Chong and Druckman (2007b), for example, used competing framing scenarios—yet still within an experiment. In doing so, they created a more realistic setting akin to a real-world setting with competing frames (see also Jerit, 2009; Sniderman & Theriault, 2004). Lecheler and de Vreese (in press–a, in press–b) exposed participants to multiple repetitive as well as competitive news frames over time and thus aim to mirror Zaller’s (1992) model of dynamic communication flows. Gaines et al. (2007) strongly advocate the further use of survey experiments in social science research but only if these are enriched with a focus on time and the duration of effects. Finally, nonobtrusive measures can be well integrated into framing experiments; see, for example, De Martino, Kumaran, Seymour, and Dolan (2006), who investigate “the neurobiological basis of the framing effect by means of functional magnetic resonance imaging” (p. 684), that is, by measuring brain activity during exposure to a frame.

Future framing research should not make definitive choices in terms of design but (as is always the case) let the question give guidance to the design. What is needed, however, is to design studies that do justice to the state of framing theory,
which is characterized by questions around the conditionality of effects (in terms of issues, frames, contexts, and individuals) and temporal as well as reinforcing and diminishing effects.

Conclusion

This special issue for good reasons makes a plea for an integrated framing research approach, and this is pursued in the empirical studies. What has hopefully become clear from this commentary is that the special issue takes us several steps forward and that many aspects are still open to be addressed: Framing is part of a dynamic process of message exchange, and framing research requires adequate study designs. Perhaps the most important one is the observation about journalistic news frames. In political communication research, we need to take all actors seriously, that is, both the political advocates and their framing of an issue and the journalists and their prioritizing, reframing, and autonomous framing.

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