

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Framing, Agenda Setting, and Priming: The Evolution of Three Media Effects Models

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*This special issue of Journal of Communication is devoted to theoretical explanations of news framing, agenda setting, and priming effects. It examines if and how the three models are related and what potential relationships between them tell theorists and researchers about the effects of mass media. As an introduction to this effort, this essay provides a very brief review of the three effects and their roots in media-effects research. Based on this overview, we highlight a few key dimensions along which one can compare, framing, agenda setting, and priming. We conclude with a description of the contexts within which the three models operate, and the broader implications that these conceptual distinctions have for the growth of our discipline.*

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In 1997, Republican pollster Frank Luntz sent out a 222-page memo called “Language of the 21st century” to select members of the U.S. Congress. Parts of the memo soon spread among staffers, members of Congress, and also journalists. Luntz’s message was simple: “It’s not what you say, it’s how you say it” (Luntz, in press). Drawing on various techniques for real-time message testing and focus grouping, Frank Luntz had researched Republican campaign messages and distilled terms and phrases that resonated with specific interpretive schemas among audiences and therefore helped shift people’s attitudes. In other words, the effect of the messages was not a function of content differences but of differences in the modes of presentation.

The ideas outlined in the memo were hardly new, of course, and drew on decades of existing research in sociology (Goffman, 1974), economics (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), psychology (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984), cognitive linguistics (Lakoff, 2004), and communication (Entman, 1991; Iyengar, 1991). But Frank Luntz was the first professional pollster to systematically use the concept of framing as a campaign tool. The Democratic Party soon followed and George Lakoff published *Don’t Think of an*

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*Elephant* (Lakoff, 2004), a short manual for liberals on how to successfully frame their own messages.

With the emergence of framing as a communication tool for modern campaigns has come a resurgence of academic research on other cognitive campaign effects, such as agenda setting and priming, many of which are thought to be related or at least based on similar premises (for overviews, see McCombs, 2004; Price & Tewksbury, 1997; Scheufele, 2000). This special issue of the *Journal of Communication* is an examination of whether and how framing, agenda setting, and priming are related and what these relationships tell theorists and researchers about the effects of mass media. As an introduction to this issue, this essay will provide a very brief review of the three effects and their roots in media effects research. Next, it will highlight a few key dimensions along which one can compare them. It will conclude with a description of the aims of this issue and the broader context within which the relationships between framing, agenda setting, and priming operate.

### **The emergence of three models of political communication**

The emerging body of research on framing, agenda setting, and priming has signaled the latest paradigm shift in political-communication research. Scholars of mass communication often suggest that the field passed through a series of paradigms in the 20th century (McQuail, 2005). The early hypodermic needle and magic-bullet models of the 1920s and 1930s were quickly replaced by a paradigm based on the much more theoretically and methodologically sophisticated ideas that Lazarsfeld and his colleagues in Columbia University's Bureau of Applied Social Research put forth in *The People's Choice* (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948) and subsequent studies. Media effects were much more complex in nature than previously assumed, they argued, and depended heavily on people's homogenous networks and their selective informational diets, which reinforced existing attitudes rather than changed them.

The 1970s marked the second major paradigm shift in research on political communication when Noelle-Neumann's (1973) proclamation about the return of powerful mass media coincided with George Gerbner's (Gerbner & Gross, 1974) development of the theory of cultivation. Ironically, the two researchers had diametrically opposed political agendas but came to similar conclusions. Both assumed that mass media had strong, long-term effects on audiences, based on the ubiquitous and consonant stream of messages they presented to audiences. But although Noelle-Neumann often blamed left-leaning journalists for shaping opinion climates and therefore influencing the dynamics of opinion expression and formation, Gerbner identified conservative media conglomerates—and especially entertainment television—as the main culprit for shaping perceptions of reality by promoting commercially motivated worldviews. Also notable in the 1970s was the birth of agenda-setting research in political communication. Sparked by the landmark study by McCombs and Shaw (1972), the effect drew considerable attention from researchers frustrated by the minimal-effects perspective common at the time.

The 1980s and early 1990s, finally, brought the most recent stage of political-effects research. Sometimes labeled “negation models” (McQuail, 2005), approaches like priming and framing were based on the idea that mass media had potentially strong attitudinal effects, but that these effects also depended heavily on predispositions, schema, and other characteristics of the audience that influenced how they processed messages in the mass media.

### **Parsimony versus precision: framing, agenda setting, and priming**

The three models we focus on in this issue—framing, agenda setting, and priming—have received significant scholarly attention since they were introduced.

*Agenda setting* refers to the idea that there is a strong correlation between the emphasis that mass media place on certain issues (e.g., based on relative placement or amount of coverage) and the importance attributed to these issues by mass audiences (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). As defined in the political communication literature, *Priming* refers to “changes in the standards that people use to make political evaluations” (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987, p. 63). Priming occurs when news content suggests to news audiences that they ought to use specific issues as benchmarks for evaluating the performance of leaders and governments. It is often understood as an extension of agenda setting. There are two reasons for this: (a) Both effects are based on memory-based models of information processing. These models assume that people form attitudes based on the considerations that are most salient (i.e., most accessible) when they make decisions (Hastie & Park, 1986). In other words, judgments and attitude formation are directly correlated with “the ease in which instances or associations could be brought to mind” (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973, p. 208); (b) based on the common theoretical foundation, some researchers have argued that priming is a temporal extension of agenda setting (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). By making some issues more salient in people’s mind (agenda setting), mass media can also shape the considerations that people take into account when making judgments about political candidates or issues (priming).

*Framing* differs significantly from these accessibility-based models. It is based on the assumption that how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences. Framing is often traced back to roots in both psychology and sociology (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). The psychological origins of framing lie in experimental work by Kahneman and Tversky (1979, 1984), for which Kahneman received the 2002 Nobel Prize in economics (Kahneman, 2003). They examined how different presentations of essentially identical decision-making scenarios influence people’s choices and their evaluation of the various options presented to them. The sociological foundations of framing were laid by Goffman (1974) and others who assumed that individuals cannot understand the world fully and constantly struggle to interpret their life experiences and to make sense of the world around them. In order to efficiently process new information, Goffman

argues, individuals therefore apply interpretive schemas or “primary frameworks” (Goffman, 1974, p. 24) to classify information and interpret it meaningfully.

Framing therefore is both a macrolevel and a microlevel construct (Scheufele, 1999). As a macroconstruct, the term “framing” refers to modes of presentation that journalists and other communicators use to present information in a way that resonates with existing underlying schemas among their audience (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). This does not mean, of course, that most journalists try to spin a story or deceive their audiences. In fact, framing, for them, is a necessary tool to reduce the complexity of an issue, given the constraints of their respective media related to news holes and airtime (Gans, 1979). Frames, in other words, become invaluable tools for presenting relatively complex issues, such as stem cell research, efficiently and in a way that makes them accessible to lay audiences because they play to existing cognitive schemas. As a microconstruct, framing describes how people use information and presentation features regarding issues as they form impressions.

### **Sorting out the differences**

An explication of the relationships between agenda setting (and priming) and framing needs to bridge levels of analysis and answer (a) how news messages are created, (b) how they are processed, and (c) how the effects are produced. The development of a conceptual model that adequately explains the three effects should therefore address the relationships among them related to these three questions. Failing to do so will leave the field with a confusing set of concepts and terminologies.

### **News production**

The first area of comparison is the production of news messages. Research in this area examines the factors related to frame building and agenda building (Scheufele, 1999, 2000). A number of different theoretical approaches—sociological, economic, critical, and psychological (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996)—have been applied to this effort, focusing on a variety of steps in news production. For example, research in the agenda-setting tradition has identified how issue agendas are built in news production (Cobb & Elder, 1971). Similarly, researchers in framing have identified the social forces that influence the promulgation of frames in news messages (e.g., Gamson & Modigliani, 1987) and have used the term “frame building” (Scheufele, 1999) to describe these processes.

Both frame building and agenda building refer to macroscopic mechanisms that deal with message construction rather than media effects. The activities of interest groups, policymakers, journalists, and other groups interested in shaping media agendas and frames can have an impact on both the volume and character of news messages about a particular issue. Thus, there may be some potential overlap in how researchers conceptualize and study the phenomena here. Zhou and Moy’s article in this special issue, for instance, examines frame building and setting. They explore mechanisms by which the public and news media may jointly build frames around

politically charged issues. Ultimately, they find that public framing of an issue exerts substantial influence on news messages in the context they study.

However, there are some obvious differences in how news production is studied in these traditions. The first has to do with the development of definitions of the independent variable. There have been significant inconsistencies in how frames in news are conceptualized and measured in research. These differences usually fall into one of two areas. (a) Studies offer new operationalizations of media frames, for example, without addressing the conceptual foundations of their work or clarifying the inconsistencies between their measures and frames used in previous studies. (b) Operationalizations of framing are often confounded by content. Framing an issue in terms of financial risks versus social consequences, for example, has little to do with differences in the mode of presentation. Rather, it measures the differential effects of messages concerned with financial issues and messages concerned with social issues. If framing is defined this broadly, it subsumes most persuasive effects under the “framing” label and, therefore, obliterates any contribution that framing as a concept could make to a more refined understanding of media effects (e.g., Scheufele, 2000).

Thus far, there has not been a need or tendency to produce a parallel profusion of media agenda types. This difference between the two models may lie, in part, in the utility of the framing approach in explaining the news production process. How forces and groups in society try to shape public discourse about an issue by establishing predominant labels is of far greater interest from a framing perspective (e.g., Gamson & Modigliani, 1987) than from a traditional agenda-setting one. Thus, it seems likely that an integration or resolution of the two should be based, in part, on conceptual models of the internal and external factors that influence news content. Van Gorp does this to some extent in the present issue. He argues that the field needs to retain an understanding of framing as a process based in and bound by culture. The reduction of framing to a process analogous to agenda setting squanders much of the power of the framing approach. Ultimately, Van Gorp argues that elements of news production are part and parcel of the entire framing process.

### News processing

How news messages that set agendas and frames are processed by recipients is the second area of comparison between different models of media effects. Here, the question is whether news audiences experience the two processes identically. Surprisingly, little research has examined their phenomenological elements. One point of comparison is the amount of attention to news messages required for the two effects to occur. We could assume that a framing effect occurs when audiences pay substantial attention to news messages. That is, the content and implications of an issue frame are likely to be most apparent to an audience member who pays attention to a news story. A parallel logic could be applied to the agenda-setting process. Information processing theories suggest that people attending to a message and engaging in some level of elaboration of it are most likely to recall information about it later (Eveland, 2004). In short, the accessibility of an issue—and therefore its place

on the issue agenda—may be higher when people attend to messages about it. Thus, agenda setting and framing may appear to operate by similar phenomenological processes. Nonetheless, there is at least one important distinction here. Attention to messages may be more necessary for a framing effect to occur than an agenda-setting effect. Mere exposure may be sufficient for agenda setting, but it is less likely to be so for framing effects.

Chong and Druckman's study in this special issue provides a blueprint for answering some of these questions empirically, and their findings provide mixed support for our speculations. They find that repetition of frames should have a greater impact on less knowledgeable individuals who also are more attentive to peripheral cues, whereas more knowledgeable individuals are more likely to engage in systematic information processing by comparing the relative strength of alternative frames in competitive situations. They also identify circumstances in which a weak frame can backfire among certain individuals, leading them to move in a direction that is opposite to the one promoted by the frame.

Similarly, Edy and Meirick's (in this issue) analyses of survey data about the September 11 attacks and the Afghan War shows that framing processes in everyday news coverage may be much more complex and that effects may, in fact, be a function of competing frames. Rather than adopting either a war frame or a crime frame, audiences combined elements of these media frames in various ways and their subsequent understanding of the events of September 11 had a significant impact on their support for the war in Afghanistan.

### Locus of effect

The third central question in the comparison between framing and basic agenda setting is the locus of cognitive effect. In both cases, audiences process information provided by the news media and store it in memory. The traditional agenda-setting approach is based on memory-based models of information processing and therefore an accessibility model (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Agenda-setting effects assume that the locus of effect lies with the heightened accessibility an issue receives from its treatment in the news (Price & Tewksbury, 1997). Thus, it is not information *about* the issue that has the effect; it is the fact that the issue has received a certain amount of processing time and attention that carries the effect.

In contrast, the basic framing approach assumes that the locus of effect lies within the description of an issue or the label used in news coverage about the issue. It is the underlying interpretive schemas that have been made applicable to the issue that are the central effect of a frame. The primary difference on the psychological level between agenda setting and priming, on the one hand, and framing, on the other hand, is therefore the difference between *whether* we think about an issue and *how* we think about it.

It has been argued that we can develop a more parsimonious understanding of framing, priming, and agenda setting if we subsume all three concepts under the larger umbrella of agenda setting. In particular, McCombs (2004) has argued that

framing is simply a more refined version of agenda setting. Framing, from that perspective, means making aspects of an issue more salient through different modes of presentation and therefore shifting people's attitudes. He labels this phenomenon "second-level agenda setting."

The concept of second-level agenda setting is not without merit. It refines the original agenda-setting hypothesis, which has long been criticized for being somewhat simplistic in its focus on broad issues and for overestimating rank-order coefficients between these broad issue categories in media coverage and public-opinion surveys (Funkhouser, 1973a, 1973b). In fact, Kim, Scheufele, and Shanahan (2002) demonstrated that second-level or attribute agenda setting can have important influences on people's perceptions of the relative importance of various aspects of an issue.

Many researchers, however, challenge the idea that agenda setting and priming, on the one hand, and framing, on the other hand, are based on the same theoretical premises and are therefore all extensions of the larger agenda-setting construct (Price & Tewksbury, 1997; Scheufele, 2000). Price and Tewksbury summarize this distinction as follows:

Agenda setting [sic] looks on story selection as a determinant of public perceptions of issue importance and, indirectly through priming, evaluations of political leaders. Framing focuses not on which topics or issues are selected for coverage by the news media, but instead on the particular ways those issues are presented. (p. 184)

These conceptual differences come down to the distinction between *accessibility* and *applicability* effects. Priming and agenda setting, Price and Tewksbury (1997) argue, are accessibility effects; that is, they are based on memory-based models of information processing. The temporal sequence of agenda setting and priming assumes that media can make certain issues or aspects of issues more accessible (i.e., easily recalled) for people and thereby influence the standards they use when forming attitudes about candidates and political issues.

This is distinctly different from framing as an applicability effect. This term refers to the outcome of a message that suggests a connection between two concepts such that, after exposure to the message, audiences accept that they are connected (Price & Tewksbury, 1997). For example, a news message may suggest a connection between tax policy and unemployment rates. The news message may suggest that the best way to think about whether higher or lower taxes are desirable is through a consideration of whether one wants higher or lower unemployment. Thus, the message has said that considerations about unemployment are applicable to questions about taxes.

The audience need not—by necessity—be familiar with unemployment as a concept. Unless the news message provides adequate amounts of information about unemployment, it would certainly help an audience to know something about it but that is not required. This implies that when audience members do not have

a construct available to them in memory, and the construct is not provided in a news story, a frame that applies the construct in a message will not be effective. We may imagine, then, that framing effects will vary in strength as a partial function of the fit between the constructs a frame suggests should be applied to an issue and either the presence of those frames in audience members' existing knowledge or the content of the message. Hwang, Gottlieb, Nah, and McLeod (in this issue) present a study that demonstrates the importance of the individual to the operation of media effects. They find that the impact of primes on audience reactions to a televised debate vary as a function of audience political knowledge and tendency to engage in postexposure reflection.

Recent attempts to integrate our understanding of how news messages affect whether we think about an issue and how we think about it have tended to minimize the differences between these two locations of effect. As a point of clarification, it must be noted that accessibility and applicability cannot be completely isolated from one another. As the model suggested by Price and Tewksbury (1997) implies, the phenomena jointly influence whether a construct will be activated in a given situation. An applicable construct is far more likely to be activated when it is accessible. Likewise, an inapplicable construct is highly unlikely to be used in a given situation, no matter how accessible it is. Indeed, even the most basic priming studies in social psychology demonstrate that inapplicable yet highly accessible constructs are unlikely to be used in social perception and judgment (e.g., Higgins, Rholes, & Jones, 1977). Even with this said, political-communication researchers still identify meaningful distinctions between applicability and accessibility effects in practice (Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997).

The question for the field is whether there is a payoff to be had from maintaining the distinction. If precision is the goal, we might be wise to retain it. It appears that the distinction between accessibility and applicability has implications for how we study and understand the two effects. For example, an accessibility effect, by definition, is more sensitive to the passage of time than is an applicability effect. If a person thinks that Attribute A belongs with Issue B, that belief will likely persist until some countervailing information is encountered. An accessibility effect is much more easily reduced by the flow of time. If we assume that the audience has finite attention and interest in politics, the accessibility of one political issue is determined, in part, by the accessibility of other issues. Thus, as issues come and go in the news, their relative accessibility is changing. On the other hand, there is no need for coverage of one issue to influence the applicability of specific constructs to other issues. Thus, keeping in mind the distinction between accessibility and applicability effects has obvious benefits for understanding and predicting the effects of dynamic information environments.

In this special issue, Schaefer pursues a promising line of research that integrates accessibility effects with those that involve processes of judgment and attitude formation. This approach has some clear advantages for thinking about how agenda setting and priming operate. It certainly seems plausible, and Schaefer finds evidence

of it across multiple elections in Israel, that *how* people think about an issue (and candidates, in an election setting) has implications for *whether* they think about it, as well. The underappreciated element of traditional agenda-setting research is that it focuses on *problems*, things that need to be fixed. Thus, an integral part of the agenda-setting story is how news reports portray, and how people understand, issues. Research in framing may certainly inform how those processes work and how they influence agenda setting.

An emphasis on attributes of candidates and other figures in the news in some research raises the importance of considering how people think about people and objects (issues). Research in social cognition has observed that people organize information about people's behaviors in a unique way, one that focuses on traits (Newman & Uleman, 1989) and social judgments about people (Hastie & Park, 1986) rather than on discreet behaviors. Information about issues, as objects, on the other hand, is likely to be retained in a different fashion, one that relies more squarely in the retention of facts about problems and solutions (Zaller, 1992). Explanatory models that assume a common processing style and, therefore, media effect for information about people and issues in the news must somehow reconcile these and other differences in the ways people think about people and things. Until they do, we probably ought to be cautious about applying them.

### **This special issue: clarifying concepts, relationships, and research agendas**

This overview, of course, leaves us with more questions than answers. This is where this special issue started out. Here is an excerpt from our original call for papers:

This special issue is devoted to theoretical explanations of news framing, agenda-setting, and priming effects. Papers for this issue should explore connections between framing-based models and agenda-setting or priming-based research. We welcome contributions that deal with only one of the three theoretical models—framing, agenda setting, or priming—as long as the article furthers our conceptual or methodological understanding of the theory in relation to the other models. We welcome both theory–development pieces and research using quantitative or qualitative approaches.

All articles, however, should make a unique contribution to understanding the processes underlying framing, priming, and/or agenda setting and the differences between them. We are especially looking for papers that do not merely provide descriptive analyses of media frames or media agendas. In addition, all papers should establish relevant links to future theorizing or measurement as well as relevant normative questions.

Our goal is to provide readers with a set of articles that illuminate the conceptual linkages and differences between agenda setting, priming, and framing and further our understanding of theorizing and research in this area.

When outlining this call, we had a few areas in mind, of course, that we considered critical for our future understanding of different models of cognitive media effects. Some of these areas were a direct outcome of the disagreements among scholars in the three areas about how to conceptualize framing, agenda setting, and priming.

More importantly, however, this special issue is designed as much as a state-of-the-field assessment as it is a catalyst and blueprint for future research in the field. As a result, the special issue is broken down into a “research” section and a “perspectives” section. The research section provides peer-refereed articles that explore the intersections between priming, framing, and agenda setting; offer refined conceptualizations and operationalizations; and critically assess the current status of the field by answering one or more of the questions raised in our call for papers.

In the perspectives section, four eminent scholars provide their views on the state of the discipline more generally and on the utility of the concepts of framing, agenda setting, and priming more specifically. All authors in this section have done seminal work in one of the three areas, and all offer very strong views on how we think conceptually about the three effects and the intersections among them. All four authors also highlight some of their own personal “biases” in terms of where they think the field should be going.

In closing, we strongly believe that our discipline needs to address many of the questions raised in this essay and, more importantly, in the articles in this special issue. We see growing signs of inefficiency and even gridlock in the variety of ways framing, agenda setting, and priming theory are used by researchers. We believe the field will benefit from greater precision and, hopefully, agreement over basic terms and concepts. We also urge researchers to use this special issue of *Journal of Communication* as a starting point to think about distinctions among these three effects models that go beyond levels of analysis. In the area of framing, for example, additional distinctions can be made that will help to clarify the concept and its relevance to the field of communication more broadly.

Some researchers, for example, have taken a very narrow approach to framing and have experimentally manipulated the description of decision situations while holding the content of the message absolutely constant (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979, 1984). This, of course, gets at the very essence of what framing is and maximizes the internal validity of a study because it restricts framing very narrowly to an effect of presentation and modality. As a result, however, it may also limit the external validity of the concept, given that the effects of messages in the real world are likely an outcome of both content and framing (Scheufele, 2000).

Based on these tensions between internal and external validity, researchers will continue to be torn between two goals. First, the field needs to explore priming, framing, and agenda setting almost as Weberian ideal types (Weber, 1949) in order to make them useful building blocks for explanatory and predictive theory building. But in a second and more challenging step, we will need to explore ways to test the interplay between the different effects models in order to develop an externally valid

understanding of how they shape audience perceptions in the real world. The latter approach, of course, is impossible without the theoretical foundation the former approach provides.

Our field, unfortunately, has largely skipped the first step and rushed ahead to the second step, which explains much of the conceptual and terminological confusions that so many scholars have written about (e.g., Entman, 1993; Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Scheufele, 1999). This special issue will hopefully help us go back (or at least look back) to the first step, revisit key concepts, and—as a result—move us ahead as a discipline.

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