

Prologue--Framing public life

A bridging model for media research

Stephen D. Reese

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Within the last several years, the concept of framing has become increasingly attractive in media research, finding its way into a number of related fields--including communication, sociology, and political science. Framing refers to the way events and issues are organized and made sense of, especially by media, media professionals, and their audiences. Sociologist Erving Goffman (1974) is often credited with introducing the framing approach, along with the anthropologist-psychologist Gregory Bateson (1972), whom Goffman credited with originating the metaphor. Within their social-psychological perspective we consider how people rely on expectations to make sense of their everyday social experience. A similar but more sociological approach has been more typically applied to questions of framing in media and communication research and opened an important field of analysis: Precisely how are issues constructed, discourse structured, and meanings developed? (e.g., Gamson, 1989; 1992).¹

Framing has been particularly useful in understanding the media's role in political life. Although it need not be restricted this way, I adopt this focus in the discussion below. Under this approach issues are not unproblematic; labeling, classifying, and reducing them to a simple theme is not the straightforward task performed elsewhere in studies of news content. As a both a noun and verb, the word "frame" suggests an active process and a result. Entman (1993) refers to framing as a fractured paradigm, but like the communication field itself its inter-disciplinary nature makes it attractive. When viewed as the interplay of media practices, culture, audiences, and producers, the framing approach guards against unduly compartmentalizing components of communication (sender, content, audience). As with any theoretical formulation, we must consider what aspects of the social world are better explained with it, and which are obscured.

The framing approach bridges the competing tendencies of social analysis toward closure and openness and may be regarded as one of its strengths. On one hand, traditional behavioral social science strives for data reduction and parsimony, measuring the accumulation of emphasis in the observed and explicit. Quantification's precise measurement makes it preferred by many scholars, but the most important frame may not be the most frequent. So, on the other hand, the qualitative turn of much framing analysis

helps resist the reductionistic urge to sort media texts and discourse into containers and count their size or frequency. Indeed, some define frames as an inherently qualitative construct. In this case, one must capture the meanings embedded in the internal relations within texts, which collapsing into reductive measures would obscure. The positivist, behavioral measures of frames based on manifest content don't capture the tensions among expressed elements of meaning, or between what is said and what is left unsaid.

The tendency, for example, to classify issues into categories, such as "the economy" and "crime," obscures the important questions of how they are defined in the first place. As Kosicki (1993) notes, the agenda-setting approach to issues, emphasizing the salience of topics, misses a "real focus on the nature of the disagreement between the parties and the essence of the controversy. In short, a great deal of valuable contextual information about the issue would be lost" (p. 116). Thus, the traditional topical agenda approach doesn't reveal much about what makes issues interesting: the way they're defined. McCombs and colleagues have responded in part by incorporating frames as a different level of agenda-setting (e.g., McCombs & Ghanem, this volume; McCombs, Shaw & Weaver, 1997). More critical, qualitative and interpretive approaches allow for ambiguity, historical contingency, the implicit, and emphasize how meaning is signified. In the first case, the danger is over-simplification, reducing a complex structure to a set of classifying measures. In the second case, however, thick description can go on and on without producing patterns that transcend the particulars. Qualitative description may produce a thorough treatment of a given issue but not help reduce the mass of information to meaningful and readily demonstrable themes.

In spite of a more nuanced approach than traditional content analysis, framing research slips just as easily into the effects paradigm. Within this audience-centered, social-psychological approach, one can demonstrate, for example, that how a social problem is cast makes a big difference in how one responds to it. Two equivalent risk scenarios, in one often repeated example, receive vastly different support from subjects depending on whether they are phrased in terms of saving lives or causing deaths (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984). This approach leads one to ask how readily the audience adopts the framing presented through the media? Pan and Kosicki (1993) question, for example, show how the matrix of signifying elements is linked to audience interpretations, recognizing that the text alone does not determine the meaning but interacts with audience memory. The audience is similarly important for Entman (1993), who considers how it engages in "counterframing" against the dominant meanings in texts. (These questions resemble those asks in the "reception analysis" strand of cultural studies and its "oppositional readings.") Scheufele (1999) organizes framing within a "theory of media effects," although allowing frames to be considered as dependent as well as independent variables.

Unquestionably, the way information is structured affects cognitive processing, and audience schemata interact with texts to determine the ultimate meaning derived from them (e.g., Iorio & Huxman, 1996). Indeed, I

am willing to grant the agenda-setting hypothesis as a basic premise--that media structure, if not dictate, the way the public thinks about its second-hand reality. Therefore, I place greater emphasis here on how issues are framed as a result of social and institutional interests. Interest in framing responds to Hackett's (1984) recommendation that media studies move beyond a narrow concern with bias--deviation from an objective standard--to a more fruitful view of the ideological character of news, thoroughly structured in its content, practices and relations with society. I would argue that plugging in framing as just one more content element, against which to measure effects, risks continuing to ignore basic power questions.

Within this ideological realm, careful framing studies have the potential to help clean up some of the problems with cultural studies, identified by Schudson (1997). While the British strand is closely linked with sociology and empirically rooted in "lived social experience," he argues that American-style cultural studies, more influenced by French structuralism, has become unhinged from any connection to real social interaction. Claiming that all knowledge is in the service of power wrongly becomes the end of the inquiry. This insight should rather be the beginning of our attempt to understand how human knowledge relates to the world. Framing helps provide tools for examining these knowledge structures, or, as Tucker (1998) suggests, empirically measuring the construction of common sense. This must in turn be carefully tied to frame sources and sponsors, social practices, and interests. With ties, then, to both the critical, qualitative, and ideological perspective and the behavioral content, audience, and effects tradition, framing provides an important bridge between them. It opens up connections among areas that for too long have been unduly compartmentalized.

Purpose

My purpose here is to consider the framing perspective's value for social analysis, and review its crucial definitional components. I present framing as an exercise in power, particularly as it affects our understanding of the political world. I will not attempt the impractical task of making an exhaustive inventory of the burgeoning research literature (other than to identify the most frequently cited, useful, and exemplary works). I will try to make sense of some of the different ways others have used framing and derive appropriate research questions using a definition and model. I will explore also a case of framing in perhaps an unusual location: a new museum in Washington, D.C., called the "Newseum," sponsored by The Freedom Forum. Presenting the newsgathering enterprise in museum form carries important structured meanings, especially in obscuring the very framing that is built into news.

Mapping the Framing Tradition

A number of definitions have been proposed to refine the framing concept. According to Entman (1993), a frame is determined in large part by its outcome or effect:

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. (p. 52)

Similarly, Tankard, Hendrickson, Silberman, Bliss and Ghanem (1991) say
A frame is a central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration. (p. 11)

Iyengar (1991) makes more modest claims for his definition: "...the concept of framing refers to subtle alterations in the statement or presentation of...problems" (p.11).

Morley (1976) says its important to examine the "basic conceptual and ideological 'framework' through which events are presented and as a result of which they come to be given one dominant/primary meaning rather than another" (p. 246). Accordingly, other definitions move beyond an emphasis on selection to capture a more active generation of meaning. I would regard framing as similar to Hall's idea of defining the situation, which if compellingly presented "provides the criteria by which all subsequent contributions are labeled as relevant or irrelevant--beside the point" (1982, p. 59). Gamson and Modigliani (1989) define frame as a "central organizing idea...for making sense of relevant events, suggesting what is at issue" (p. 3). And it causes other events to be noticed out of "happenings. This core frame is suggested by the "media package" of metaphors and other devices. Goffman (1974) notes that frames help classify, allowing users to "locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences defined in its limits" (p. 21). Similarly, Edelman (1993) says frames exert their power "especially in how observations are classified...and categorized" (p. 232). Hertog and McLeod (1995) note that framing defines the context for an occurrence: "The frame used to interpret an event determines what available information is relevant (and thereby what is irrelevant)" (p. 4). If a protest march, for instance, is framed as a confrontation between police and marchers, the protesters' critique of society may not be part of the story--not because there wasn't room for it, but because it was not defined as relevant.

In one of the most common citations, Gitlin (1980) views frames as "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse..." (p. 7). His definition lays the emphasis on the routine organization that transcends any given story and is "persistent" over time (resistant to change). In dealing with information, frames enable journalists to "recognize it as information, to assign it to cognitive categories..." (p. 21). This gives frames a power, actively to bring otherwise amorphous reality into a meaningful structure, making it more than the simple inclusion or exclusion of information. Thus, frames are active, information generating, as well as screening devices.

A working definition

Framing is concerned with the way interests, communicators, sources, and culture combine to yield coherent ways of understanding the world, which are developed using all of the available verbal and visual symbolic resources. Before proceeding further, it will be helpful to propose my own working definition of framing, one that suggests a series of research questions out of its components.

Frames are *organizing principles* that are socially *shared* and *persistent* over time, that work *symbolically* to meaningfully *structure* the social world.

- **Organizing:** Framing varies in how successfully, comprehensively, or completely it organizes information.
- **Principles:** The frame is based on an abstract principle and is not the same as the texts through which it manifests itself.
- **Shared:** The frame must be shared on some level for it to be significant and communicable.
- **Persistent:** The significance of frames lies in their durability, their persistent and routine use over time.
- **Symbolically:** The frame is revealed in symbolic forms of expression.
- **Structure:** Frames organize by providing identifiable patterns or structures, which can vary in their complexity.

Organizing

To say that frames organize suggests the active work that goes on in generating meaning. We may ask how much meaning frames--some more ambitious than others--attempts to organize. How successful is a frame in accounting for the social reality it tries to explain? In an interactive process, journalists are said to routinely seek the best narrative fit between incoming information and existing frames (Wolfsfeld, 1997).

Framing “organizes” in a number of ways, but two major ways of thinking about this can be identified: cognitively and culturally. Cognitively organizing frames invite us to think about social phenomena in a certain way, often by appealing to basic psychological biases. Studies have examined, for example, the effects of information that emphasizes positive or negative aspects, the individual or the collective, and the episodic or the thematic. Reporting on racial issues has been examined for its emphasis on winners or losers (Goshorn & Gandy, 1995). In another example, Davis (1995) experimented with changes to environmental stories, producing the best result with a message emphasizing the negative results of the public’s own inaction to themselves or their current generation. This, what might be called “tactical” framing, suggests a specific arrangement or pattern of information, with a scope limited to that message (even if such a pattern, say “horse race” political coverage, is pervasive).

This framing organization may be limited to casting a problem in terms of either saving lives or certain deaths, as in the often cited Kahneman and Tversky (1984) example, or in Iyengar’s (1991) comparison of issues based on episodic or thematic treatment. The episodic, or “anecdotal,” story

offers compelling stories of concrete events and individuals, which find a more ready cognitive reception than the more accurate, perhaps, but duller thematic, "base-line" story. In studies like these the specific content of the "frame" is usually less important than the effects question: How does one way or another of presenting a story affect audience response? Although their impact may be important, they don't have the same dynamic quality of organizing a broader cultural terrain.

Other, more "cultural" frames don't stop with organizing one story, but invited us to marshal a cultural understanding and keep on doing so beyond the immediate information. These are the "strategic" frames that speak to a broader way to account for social reality. Wolfsfeld (1997), for example, adopts Gamson's notion of frame "depth," ranging from deep (older, more taken for granted, more general) to shallow (recent, specific). In Vietnam frames, for example, "Peace through strength" and "Cold War" are deeper than "falling domino" and "unprovoked attack." Indeed, the culturally wide ranging "Cold War" frame contained within it a vast array of deeply rooted assumptions, and ways of understanding and depicting global relations.

In a more recent example, the "War on Drugs" frame used military imagery to explain the nation's illegal drug problem in a way that organizes a broad swath of events and issues (e.g., McCauley & Frederick, 1993). Or consider the affirmative action debate within higher education. The frames of "equal treatment" and "merit-based admissions" have a vast apparatus behind them, and are based on a set of assumptions, evidence, and world view. The more elaborated and purposive political efforts of social movements exploit these frames when they seek to organize meaning for their supporters by diagnosing problems and proposing solutions (Snow & Benford, 1988). Examining coverage of the Palestinian *intifada* uprising reveals two basic "meta-frames"-- "law and order" and "injustice and defiance"--which are historically preferred by the powerful and weaker antagonists, respectively (Wolfsfeld, 1997). Thus, these frames distill and call up a larger world of meaning. When these frames are picked up without their supporting apparatus, made implicit and naturalized, they gain organizing power.

We must trace then the scope of frames, to evaluate the sweep of social reality they propose to explain and organize--considering their restrictiveness, openness, coherence, and comprehensiveness. All frames are not equal in their ability to cause information to cohere, making sense out of the world. We should ask how much "framing" is going on? How adequate is the frame to contain the elements it proposes to embrace? How close is the frame to that promoted by sources or indicated by an event? Is the frame convincing in accounting for reality?

Ultimately, frames are of greatest interest to the extent they add up to something bigger than an individual story. In that respect, we gain little from the concept if a frame is reduced to a "stance" or position on an issue, or "dominant theme," as do, for example, Friedland and Mengbai (1996). Pan and Kosicki even have said that, because of its structuring function, a theme is a frame (1993). Thus, the theme identified in an article about a Wichita anti-abortion rally--"Abortion debate is a conflict and confrontation"--comes

closer to being frame-like because it organizes a way of viewing the issue (with greater “depth”), compared to one of the subthemes: “antiabortion protesters want to change the established law” (p. 67). This theme/frame simply describes their actual stance as reported in the story and does not organize meaning much beyond that basic chunk of social reality.² The dynamic nature of framing is better captured if we presume that the reporter understood the rally through the confrontation frame, causing the gathering to be linked to a previous violent episode.

Principles

In referring to a frame as an organizing “principle,” I emphasize its abstract quality. The frame is not the same as its symbolic manifestation, which means we must get behind surface features to the generating principle that produced one way of framing a story, but is at work in many others as well. This suggests that we must often infer the organizing principle from media discourse, which is a conglomeration of inter-locking and competing organizing ideas. Or we must ask what principles are held by journalists or frame sponsors that give rise to certain ways of expressing them.

Ultimately, frames may best be viewed as an abstract principle, tool, or “schemata” of interpretation that works through media texts to structure social meaning. Gamson and Modigliani (1989), for example, refer to a frame as an “organizing idea.” These interpretive principles are made manifest in discourse; symbolic devices making up media texts constitute the epiphenomena of the underlying principle. Entman (1993) suggests that frames can be located in the communicator, the text, the receiver and the culture. More accurately perhaps we should say that frames are principles of organizing information, clues to which may be found in the media discourse, within individuals, and within social and cultural practices. While we may consider whether information is in or out of a text, we need to also consider the principles that naturally lead to it being excluded or included, such that one may not even notice the exclusion. In Gitlin’s (1980) view, for example, frames are inevitably part of a much larger set of structures, or societal ideology, that finds its manifestation in the text. To ignore the principle that gives rise to the frame is to take media texts at face value, and to be misled by manifest content.

A focus on the organizing principle should caution us that what is seen in media texts is often the result of many inter-related, competing principles from contending sources and media professionals themselves. The framing principle may generate a coverage blackout, yielding little discourse to analyze. This is the case, for example, with stories identified by Project Censored in both the U.S. and Canada (1996), watchdog groups that look for issues not getting the coverage their importance deserved. Thus, we may ask whose principle was dominant in producing the observed coverage? How did the principles brought to bear by journalists interact with those promoted by their sources? These questions require looking behind the scenes and making inferences from the symbolic patterns in news texts.

Thus, a frame is a moment in a chain of signification. As sources promote “occurrences” into “events,” as journalists define and seek out information that fits their organizing ideas, frames can help designate any number of moments when we can say that a certain organizing principle was operating to shape social reality. These moments being fluid makes it risky for us to fix one point in time that happens to be most visible, such as in a news story. As discussed above, when issues are analyzed, we tend to prematurely think of their definition as self-evident. It is, of course, useful to partition off a set of concerns and call it, for example, the “drug issue,” but framing reminds us that the way issues are defined is itself problematic. How much does this issue definition embrace, and when does it transition into another?

Shared

Given that frames must be shared in order to be useful and noteworthy organizing devices, we must question the extent to which they are shared. Asking this may help us determine whether they are personal and idiosyncratic, social and shared, or, if broadly and deeply shared, cultural. Frames may be considered as always in the process of gaining or losing organizing value--and are adopted or abandoned accordingly. Thus, frames vary at any given time in the number of people who may find them useful and share them. Neuman, Just and Crigler (1992), for example, found that news media used the tactical frames of “conflict” and “powerlessness” most of the time, while audience members relied on such frames as “human impact” and “moral values.” Frame sponsors, thus, must capitalize on shared frames.

Of course, this leads us to the next question for framing study: What makes a satisfactory, and thus readily embraced, frame? What makes a frame “work?” When is it successful in providing a useful and coherent way of accounting for social reality? Of course, frames are never imposed directly on media audiences. The acceptance and sharing of a media frame depends on what understandings the “reader” brings to the text to produce negotiated meaning.

Persistent

By frames I presume we are talking about those patterns that are important enough to warrant our study--either that they are connected to some more important cause, or that they persist over time and over instances. Unless frames endure over time they have relatively little importance for analysis. This leads us to question what factors account for one frame’s persistence over another. Gamson and Modigliani (1989), for example, traced the “interpretive packages” in news coverage of nuclear power over 40 years, showing how media discourse could be characterized by three major phases. Taking this constructionist view shows how long frames persist before evolving into different forms.

As mentioned above, Gitlin defines a frame as a persistent and routine way of handling information, suggesting tendencies that are resistant to change. Routinization suggests that a frame has become second-nature, well

entrenched, and built into the way of doing things. This embedding of frames within organizational practices can be seen in, for example, local television coverage of domestic war protest (Reese & Buckalew, 1994?). This resistance to change, indicated by such a routine, suggests in functional terms that we've stumbled upon a structure that is satisfying some important need. The more persistent the frame, the more likely it deserves examination.

Symbolic

To say that frames work symbolically refers to how they are manifested and communicated in their various forms, through any combination of symbolic devices. This area has accounted for the most research and leads one to ask what kinds of symbolic elements work together to constitute a frame? The framing approach enlivens the study of media discourse, taking it seriously enough to rigorously examine its symbolic organization. In this respect, it is closely related to such European efforts as the Glasgow Media Group (1995), Fowler (1991), and van Dijk (1993).

Miller and his colleagues, for example, stick close to the symbolic level as they seek to identify and compare competing frames by examining specific vocabularies (e.g., Miller, 1997; Miller & Riechart, this volume). Certainly, media texts represent the most readily available evidence of frames, and creating an inventory of verbal and visual features can be useful. We still need, however, to figure out how those features are woven together to signify a frame. Pan and Kosicki (1993), for example, elaborate framing in news discourse to include four structures: syntactical, script, thematic, and rhetorical. Gamson and Modigliani (1989) measure framing "devices": metaphors, catchphrases, exemplars, depictions, and visual images.

Although framing's symbolic aspect is important, equating it with the text unduly narrows the focus. In community power research, for example, focusing on only overt political decision has caused analysts to underestimate the underlying power that can prevent some issues from ever coming up. Just because issues make the agenda, doesn't mean they are necessarily the key issues--they may just be the only ones on which elites disagree. As Lukes (1974) argues, the most effective power prevents conflicts (and perhaps manifested frames) from arising in the first place. Of course, we can most easily measure what is visible and available, and from there we take the "highlighted," "noticeable," and most "salient" features. We shouldn't oversell this aspect, however, just because it is most manifest. Framing should remind us that content is only the tip of a very big iceberg.

Entman (1993) says framing offers a way to "describe the power of a communicating text" and "the transfer of information from one location...to that consciousness" (p. 51, 52). Of course, the symbolic aspect of framing must be described, but it's easy for it to lead easily into a transmission model, as in the work of Pan and Kosicki (1993), who place the frame between producers and audiences, yielding another content measure to represent a source of effects. Even their approach to coding stories is based on how a reader would consume them--story by story, sentence by sentence. Indeed, we must question whether this is the way frames add up, with the sheer weight of

accumulated sentences? A frame may be distributed across a number of stories in its symbolic terrain.

Miller (1997), Tankard et al. (1991), and others treat media as a symbolic site, on which various stakeholders contend. They might ask, for example, if a story is better characterized as pro-life or pro-choice? This, however, may fix the terrain prematurely--viewing news stories as neutral vessels, holding various pro and con positions. But what were the choices available for the story, what were the structured tendencies to produce stories containing a balance of certain views? What were the rules working to screen out particular perspectives? Of course, the media structure creates certain kinds of frames routinely and exclude much of what doesn't fit. Thus, the way we emphasize symbolic content and handle its measurement structures the conclusions we may reach about framing.

Structure

Frames structure. That is, they impose a pattern on the social world, a pattern constituted by any number of symbolic devices. Early in the life of an issue, for example, a dominant frame may not have taken hold but may gain in the complexity and coherence of its structure over time. The "frame" metaphor draws our attention to this structure--how the principles of organization create a coherent "package" by combining symbols, giving them relative emphasis, and attaching them to larger cultural ideas (Gamson, 1992). By definition, then, it should not be possible to reduce a frame to single indicator, or "topic." This structure may be manifest and explicit, or embedded and implicit. Some frames can be easily defined: lives lost or lives saved, positive or negative. Others depend on more complex and implicit structures that are not as easily classified and manipulated in, for example, an experimental setting.

Our libel laws, for example, are based on explicit and manifest expressions of framing inclusion and exclusion. In a recent case in Philadelphia, a man sued a television station for libel for a story that depicted him as a child kidnapper. The anchor (with an over-the-shoulder graphic of a close-up face and the words "A mother's anguish") introduced the story as follows: "Can you imagine the anguish of a mother who finds her *missing* child, only to live in fear he will *disappear* again? (our reporter) has one such story..." (Emphasis added) (WCAU-TV, May 29, 1996). The station, in its defense, correctly stated that the man had been arrested in Texas. The arrest, however, came as a result of his wife falsely accusing him of abducting their child. The more implicit and deeply structured bias of the story was found in the frame of "a mother's suffering." The reporter criminalized the father, who had legal custody of the child under Mexican law, and cast him in opposition to the heroic mother. The president of the Center for Missing Children was interviewed to further reinforce the criminal frame:

We broke the case. We got a lead, which led us to believe that the abducting parent and (son) were going to be coming in to Houston Intercontinental Airport.

This less explicit and manifest frame made it more difficult for the plaintiff to build a successful case.³

To say, as in some “minimalist” definitions, that frames call attention to certain aspects of reality, makes no claim greater than for any other act of communication. Texts always include some ideas and leave out others. The proposed definition above gets at a more active, structuring job that frames perform in conveying meaning, and moves beyond the presence or absence, or mere emphasis of information. The simple notion of inclusion and exclusion at least reminds us that a method must be found to evaluate it. That requires being in a position to know what could have been in that was not. These frames can be seen as having a deep and implicit symbolic structure, which suggests strongly rooted assumptions and rules for making sense of the world, or they may be more manifest, surface structures, which may be more objectively determined by the presence or exclusion of information. Both need to be taken into account to gain a complete picture of framing.

Agenda setting uses Entman’s language of exclusion/inclusion in identifying the kinds of attributes selected to describe a particular subject (object), with emphasis serving as the primary determinant of framing power. Although McCombs, Shaw and Weaver (1997) acknowledge that a “rich variety of frames” affects the details of what we get from the news, there is many a slip between agenda object and picture in our head, and it is precisely these details that concern us here. Thus, the structuring of meaning must go beyond inclusion or exclusion. If a frame produces “omission,” we ask how that omission is naturalized, made to seem as a logical exclusion or common-sensical irrelevancy.

On the most basic level, frame structure calls attention to the internal organization within news stories. Tankard’s (this volume) “list of frames” approach, for example, doesn’t as directly tackle this structuring dynamic (Tankard et al., 1991). For example, choosing an issue like abortion immediately brings with it a polarized way of thinking of the subject. I might be surprised if a story could be reliably categorized using only one pole of the debate, such as pro-life. Instead the frame of such a story would more likely tend to a meta-structure, an accepted, “on one hand versus the other hand,” way of organizing the discussion.

Coverage of the Holocaust revisionist movement shows a similar media tendency to seek a misguided form of “balance,” even when dealing with incredible claims. The inclusion of a revisionist position in coverage shifts the frame to a “two sides to every story,” “the truth must lie somewhere in between” kind of judgment. Indeed, the presence of two competing sponsored frames creates a larger and self-justifying meta-frame structure, which implies its own success in accounting for the defined “positions” on the issue.⁴ This surface structure, however, may not reveal the complete picture, given that the most dominant position often need enter the fray, but needs to be taken into account. By tackling the question of how meaning is structured, framing relates closely to ideological analysis, but it places greater emphasis on the nature of the organizing structures and how they get established.

The Framing Model

Using the definition proposed above helps pose a number of research questions raised by the framing perspective. Another way to look at it is to consider what makes framing problematic? In my view, the territory marked out by framing can best be described by the following question model:

What power relationships and institutional arrangements support certain routine and persistent ways of making sense of the social world, as found through specific and significant frames, influential information organizing principles that are manifested in identifiable moments of structured meaning and become especially important to the extent they find their way into media discourse, and are thus available to guide public life.

In this more politically pointed approach, frames are connected to asymmetric interests. The power to frame depends on access to resources, a store of knowledge, and strategic alliances. Alternatively, some have depicted media as upholding a natural order. Ericson, Baranek and Chan (1989), for example, view news as a “daily barometer” of how society works. Bird and Dardenne (1988) claim that news “creates order out of disorder--provides answers to baffling questions...” (p. 67). Of course, as the framing model suggests, there is no unproblematic natural order not developed through ongoing contestation.

This notion of framing contestation draws attention to how journalists organize information as the outcome of their interaction with their sources promoting their various perspectives. Entman and Rojecki (1993), for example, consider how journalists exercise “framing judgments” that filter into the news. On a specific level, these include evaluations of groups’ rationality, expertise, public support, partisanship, unity, extremism, and power--and are influenced by elite sources and professional ideology. In another source-oriented approach, Snow and Benford (1988) treat framing as something social movements do--it’s the result of their activities, with their success depending largely on the result of their framing success efforts. The critiques of the public relations industry, for example, are full of these success stories, which help explain why certain sources are so successful in convincing journalists that their frame is the most useful way or organizing an issue.

In a more ideological sense, news frames can support interests even if not intentionally. An analysis of a General Motors plant closing argues that the “lean and mean” frame, accepted uncritically by the media, supported core capitalist values (Martin & Oshagan, 1997). In international news, U.S. policy in El Salvador is framed as honorable (Solomon, 1992), and the *New York Times* used frames undermining the viability of the West German Green party (Carragee, 1991).

News Framing and the Growth Issue

One short example illustrates these links between frames, sources, and interests. In reporting on growth issues in communities, the media frequently resort to the frame of “the team” or “the game.” This approach locates the

local media as a member of the community team as they compete with other cities to acquire highly sought after business (often high technology). This frame is persistent, widely shared, and clearly promoted by the sponsors.

For example, high tech initiatives in Austin, Texas, have been presented as being beneficial for local citizens, as they have elsewhere. Programs like Microelectronics and Computer Consortium (MCC), Sematech, and U.S. Memories, were promoted in the 1980s by a coalition of local business, governmental and media leaders, but the entire community has not benefited. Studies show that unemployment is no lower in communities that are growing, and, in fact, crime, congestion and other problems typically ensue (Molotch, 1993). While the city has grown rapidly, so have environmental problems and the difficulty finding affordable housing.

In an analysis of local television news several years ago, I found a number of framing examples supporting local economic interests.⁵

- At the successful attraction of Sematech to town in 1988, the newscast banner read: “We Win!” An anchor claimed: “We can expect long term benefits.” (Note the word “we.”) The organizing idea of an entire town winning turned up frequently. The governor called it a “home run.”
- Over time, as the “winning” frame gained strength, reporter estimates of city benefit escalated from “\$80 to 100 million” in one story, to “100 million” in another, to finally “at least a 100 million.”
- As to the impact of Sematech on neighborhoods, a reporter said, “All of Austin is anxious to get Sematech here,” especially, it was reported, in one high unemployment area. Later it was acknowledged that local residents wouldn’t qualify for the hi-tech jobs in question.
- Later, conflict emerged over Sematech as the “winning” frame weakened, allowing another view to creep in. The county appraisal review board said the consortium was not tax exempt. A Sematech executive, persisting with the original “everybody wins” frame, raised a warning about losing firms like his: “I don’t think that sends the kind of signal that *we* in Texas are proud of sending.”
- In 1989 U.S. Memories was visiting Austin to scout locations. A reporter said that Austin may win with its “people package and attitude.” A local leader of the effort said, “We know we can do it again.” When Austin made the short list for the company, the mayor said, “The entire Austin community made it possible.”

These frames were powerful, well-structured, and widely shared, especially among the business and media community, but based on key political interests, not the overall welfare of the community as implied.

Framing case study: The Newseum

Much of the framing research reviewed above has examined media coverage of issues. Given the symbolic quality of frames, they may be found across many settings and not limited to written texts. Like the news media, museums are often presented as objective containers of our history, physical world, and accomplishments as a society, but they have their own structured

meaning, or “frames.” Donna Haraway (1989), for example, has analyzed the politics of culture of New York’s American Museum of Natural History. Australian scholar Tony Bennett (e.g., 1992) has carried out similar work in considering how museums ought best to handle the Aboriginal culture and experience. I am also influenced by recent analyses of Disney’s parks, and others like Sea World, which consider the powerful frames generated by the inter-locking symbolic machinery of these attractions as tied to marketing and media operations (e.g., Davis, 1997; Fjellman, 1992; Giroux, 1999). Structured meaning must be understood across the entirety of these settings, not just in the viewing of a particular show or buying a certain product.

That museums, some more directly than others, are tied to interests is not always self-evident. Even the National Park Service has allowed commercial intrusion in some of its locations. In the visitor’s center for Old Ironsides, the U.S.S. Constitution ship in Boston, for example, the defense contractor Raytheon has placed several posters depicting the uniforms of the armed forces over the years, complete with patriotic slogans. Thus, a commercial firm appropriates Americans’ affection for historic sites, while establishing an implicit pro-military frame within an ostensibly non-commercial and neutral setting.

Newseum Background

One of the most recent and heavily promoted museums in the United States is privately financed and—officially autonomous of its corporate origins--was created by the foundation originating from the Gannett newspaper chain, the nation’s largest. Espousing non-partisan devotion to “free press, free speech, and free spirit,” The Freedom Forum, supported by a just over one billion dollar endowment (as of 1999), opened “The Newseum” in April of 1997. Presented as the only interactive museum of news, the Newseum contains a history gallery, an interactive newsroom, an auditorium for broadcasting interviews with newsmakers and journalists, a video news wall, a movie theater, and the inevitable gift shop. Adjacent to the Newseum is Freedom Park, which memorializes slain journalists. Museum designer Ralph Appelbaum oversaw the project, which followed his acclaimed United States Holocaust Memorial in Washington, D.C. A news story about his work questioned whether objects had “communicative power without clever packaging,” concerning which Appelbaum said, “Objects need to be contextualized ... People want stories” (Solomon, 1999).

The Freedom Forum grew out of the Gannett Foundation Media Studies Center and operates the Media Studies Center in New York, the First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, and now the Newseum at its World Center headquarters in Arlington, Virginia.⁶ Examining this impressive 50-million dollar museum investment calls for a case-study, multi-method approach that suits framing studies. My analysis is based on my visits to the Newseum in July 1997 and again in April 1998, where I took notes and gathered the available printed material. The case is particularly interesting for a number of reasons. Although ostensibly autonomous, The Freedom Forum has close corporate ties to Gannett. Forum founder and

chairman, former Gannett head Al Neuharth, was succeeded by former Gannett vice-president Charles Overby, with former *USA Today* editor Peter Prichard serving as Forum President. Two other former Gannett paper editors, John Seigenthaler and John Quinn, are also trustees.

In recent years, the Forum's Media Studies Center has moved from an academic setting at Columbia University to mid-town Manhattan, to better reflect its mission shift from a media think tank with a scholarly emphasis to a decidedly industry-oriented public outreach. Thus, while it does contain a fascinating array of historical materials devoted to news, I would argue that the Newseum is, from a framing standpoint, a public showcase for how American corporate media would want the public to perceive their work.⁷

Newseum framing

Ironically, the Newseum's frame suggests that there is no frame for news, deflecting attention from the way news is structured in support of organizational and societal interests. Below I will suggest a number of ways the Newseum strives to present a view of the news product as an unproblematic commodity. The possibility of news resulting from powerful and contending views of reality is effectively denied by this "anti-frame."

The Freedom Forum says that "by taking visitors behind the scenes we hope to forge a deeper public understanding about why and how news is reported...and remind the public...of the great risks many journalists take to bring us the news" (1996 Annual Report, p. 7). Elsewhere, the Forum provides a Newseum Education Center, which makes teaching materials available for schools to help "students become better informed news consumers" (p. 4). Although admirable in one respect, such education efforts can be faulted for preparing the public to accept news the way it is, with little critique of how it relates to the larger society or admission of any shortcomings.

The eternal news cycle

Upon entering the Newseum, one is invited to view a short film, "What's News." The introduction says, "We are all reporters: look to the left and right. One of you may be a reporter. Be careful what you say!" Presented in an IMAX style spherical theater, with dramatic sound and visual effects, the film depicts news as part of the never-ending cycles of war and peace, love and hate, life and death: "The world comes to you. We call it news. From tranquility base to Kitty Hawk, news is 'firsts.' History starts as news...Life is news. Where there's life there's news."

By inviting the viewer to regard news within a context of natural cycles, news becomes an organically necessary and unproblematic feature of society--as natural as life and death and the basis for all else. Indeed, the brochure distributed at the Newseum makes the argument directly: "From its birth as shared stories, news has fulfilled a fundamental human need--the need to know...First come facts, then ideas, then ideals." As the brochure explains, "News is as old as human history--and as new as a digital image flashing halfway around the world." This "natural news" frame presents news as the very basis for society, the fact gathering function on which ideals are based, an

eternal cycle that equates early oral story-telling with modern, global, corporate media. This universalism is underscored: “News tells a compelling, universal story. It binds us together to share moments of joy and tragedy.”

On the 126-foot-long Video News Wall, news from around the world is presented. An inscription on a nearby wall tells visitors that

This is the news stream--the endless flow of fresh data,
events, issues, and ideas that give us our picture of the world.

In the digital age, the news stream is growing beyond
measures--News comes faster from all directions.

This view of news as raw empiricism again diverts attention from the social judgments and arrangements of power that go into framing that stream of information into meaningful stories and routine patterns.

News and freedom

The Newseum further shapes its view of news by connecting it to freedom. If news is unframed, then the only distortion arises from hampering its dissemination. As stated in its materials, “The Newseum focuses on the inseparable link between news and freedom.” Although freedom is an important value in American society, the Newseum privileges this one over others and suggests that more freedom (and not greater responsibility or public involvement) is the main solution to any concerns with the news media. If the news is a natural and universal need, then any attempts to impede it and threaten the freedom of those who produce it is, of course, unacceptable. One Forum program, for example, was said to “give industry leaders a better understanding of the rights inherent in the First Amendment.” A Forum newsletter column argues that “At a time of growing public dissatisfaction with the press, a little James Madison may go a long way” (Paulson, 1997, p. 8). This emphasis on rights versus responsibilities for news producers combines easily with the preference for consumer appreciation for news over public critique.

News is further bound to core values with Freedom Park, and its Journalists Memorial. A nearby sign carries the following inscription:

Freedom Forum journalists memorial honors reporters, editors,
photographers, and broadcasters who gave their lives reporting the
news. Around the world journalists have placed themselves in peril.

Thousands simply disappeared, the victims of cruel regimes. Their
names lost to history. Those named here intone their collective legacy:

They fought and died in the battle to report the truth.

This public listing of journalists’ names resembles the Vietnam memorial and invites visitors to attribute to them the same heroic qualities evoked by the nation’s military tradition. The emphasis on fallen journalists as “martyrs,” to use Al Neuharth’s phrase, and to attribute heroic qualities to them in the memorial, purposefully borrows the meaning of these terms--to show courage and die on behalf of a noble calling and great principle. In one of the news releases for the memorial, the journalists were said to have given their lives to “get the truth.”

Through the memorialized journalists, news takes on mythic and idealized proportions. While sympathetic to those who have lost their lives and shown genuine courage, the effect of giving news and the profession of journalism such heroic overtones is to give it to their employers as well. This hagiography further roots news within an individual context, casting journalists as the ones responsible for the news we get. One would feel terribly ungrateful in criticizing the news media if to do so is to dishonor the unfortunate individuals who were killed while gathering its raw material. Collapsing all of the practices and institutional arrangements used to produce the news commodity into a powerfully framed heroic monument obliterates more critical questions.

News as individual effort

Indeed, the individualistic nature of journalism permeates the Newseum. Visitors are invited to “interview a journalist” by selecting options on a computer monitor. In the interactive newsroom, visitors are invited to test their “news judgment” and “Be a Reporter.” The computerized guide urges participants to “dig for the truth.” Another station invites visitors to “Be an Editor: print fair news, be accurate, consider news value, confirm your facts, meet your deadline.” The implicit message here is that a fixed standard governs news decisions, and the visitor should strive to follow the suggested framework in making the correct judgments. The further implication is that the individual news professional, who one is emulating interactively, is in control of the relevant news shaping decisions. The practical requirements of rendering a more efficient handling of visitors lead to the interactive questions being strictly formatted, and the do-it-yourself news “anchors” encouraged to stick to a prepared script. As Friedman (1998) points out, this limited framework ironically approximates the way actual journalists’ autonomy is institutionally constrained.⁸

These interactive stations further advance the frame that news is a natural product, prepared by professionals who are given the power to make the appropriate decisions. Locating this power at the journalist level leaves little of it for outside sources, sponsors of frames, or corporate influence. It’s the corollary of the Right-Wing critique of the biased liberal journalist, a critique favored by journalists themselves for granting them more autonomy than the liberal counter-critique centering on corporate influence. At worse, the journalist may be accused of liberal-bias, at best one may aspire to be memorialized in Freedom Park. In either case, the frame hides the larger forces at work behind the news product.

As a monument to the profession, the overall project is actually in odd tension with journalists view of themselves; in a *New York Times* article the writer said the Newseum is making every effort to “demystify a process that often mystifies its practitioners.” Tacitly accepting the anti-frame, she claims that “Reporters are players, but bit players” in a larger historical show (Barringer, 1998).

Audience response

The Polling Place invites visitors to register their opinions about news and see the results displayed after they respond. Given that the museum goes would likely have more interest in news than the public at large, it is perhaps not surprising to see generally favorable responses. When asked to rate the job the news media are doing, 13 percent said excellent and 52 percent said good. Rating the overall quality of news received every day, 15 percent again said excellent and 53 percent said good. (These figures were from July 10th, and are updated cumulatively with each additional visitor voting.) Of course, after being treated to a free admission, it may seem churlish for a visitor to respond otherwise. When asked to respond to more specific criticisms of news, visitors were more troubled: 63 percent said it was a problem that news was manipulated by special interests, 58 percent said bias was a major problem, 57 percent that it was superficial, and 72 percent that it was sensationalized. The Newseum, however, is not designed to tackle these issues.

Visitors are also asked how concerned they are that news “covers the liberal point of view?”: 27 percent said a great deal, 22 percent some, and 12 percent a little. The matching question regarding the “conservative point of view” is not asked, but that is in keeping with the nature of the “liberal bias” critique--that the source of the bias is located with the individual journalist, attributing to them the kind of power underscored by the Newseum.

Summary and Conclusion

The case of the Newseum usefully illustrates the definition of framing proposed earlier. The museum displays, programs, and commentary organize a wide range of history, professional practices, and technological trends under the naturalized news “anti-frame.” The principle guiding these presentations must in part be derived from what we know of Gannet and other media corporation objectives, that how news is conceived must support the modern commercial system of newsgathering, not calling into question the basic rightness of this arrangement for American society. (Much of the Freedom Park exhibit is devoted to symbols of threats to freedom from outside this country: the Berlin Wall, South Africa, Cuba, and so forth.)

The frame is clearly shared, given the popularity of the exhibits and the uncritical reception that the Newseum has received. The persistence of this frame is strong, given its connection to enduring American values such as freedom. The symbolic aspects of the frame are seen in the entire experience that visitors are given, from the moment they enter the building to exiting through the gift shop with their souvenir T-shirts and coffee mugs. The frame is clearly well-structured, especially given that it is under the control of a single sponsor, the Forum. Competing frames are not available, so this one is well-integrated. Although my analysis is designed to be more provocative than comprehensive, the Newseum case suggests the value of the framing model for understanding media. Of course, my approach here resembles an ideological analysis, but the framing approach helps further point to a body of questions that organize our thinking.

I have attempted to suggest such, through definitions, model, and illustrative cases such framing questions that commend themselves to media analysis. Of course, posing the questions is always much easier than answering them, with specific methods, measurements, and research strategies. My working definition suggests a number of possibilities, but certainly examining framing requires that we do comparative work. Given that the naturalistic nature of much of the framing process makes it tough to identify, research would benefit from observations over time to examine emerging frames, and cross-cultural work to compare the framing process under different societal conditions and with other indicators of social reality. This means not confining ourselves to media materials, but interviewing journalists, sources, and audience members.

By bridging the behavioral and critical, the quantitative and qualitative, the framing paradigm has potential for informing and enriching these approaches. It's not enough to say either that knowledge is in the service of power or that knowledge emerges naturally through the pluralistic interplay of forces. Framing suggests that we specifically study how our social understanding is structured and how these understandings are tied to interests. Thus, to study framing means we must address normative issues. Although social science research has not emphasized explicit value judgments in analysis of press coverage, framing can't help but suggest them. How well did the press frame do justice to the issue? Why were journalists so willing to adopt the frame of a special interest group, when another would have been closer to the truth?

These are questions that academic analysts can easily share with media professionals. In his review of press coverage of China, for example, journalist James Mann (1999) considers the frame concept: "the single story, image, or concept" (p. 103) that governs the reporting in the media, affects editors mindsets, and sets the context against which journalists contend. Specifically, he warns against reducing China to a one dimensional, and distorting, frame. Editor Frank Denton (1998) cited framing research he found useful in understanding how journalists and readers approach stories from different perspectives.

The growing and powerful media watchdog industry, especially well-funded on the Right, has been doing this kind of framing research for years without exactly calling it that (e.g., Accuracy in Media, Media Research Institute, Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting). And critical analyses have been emerging recently of the important framing role played by the public relations industry (Ewen, 1996; Nelson, 1989; Stauber & Rampton, 1995). Even if academic media researchers do not share the political spin of such groups, it is important that they be aware of the concerns that animate them--that the media are powerful, economic concerns, often distant from the audiences they serve, producing news as a commodity, generating frames that may distort as much as they illuminate our social world. The framing model comes closer than many research areas in our field to posing important, intelligible questions of common concern to scholars, press watchdogs, and ultimately the public as well.

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¹ Framing has begun to find its way into the textbooks of the field, including volumes by Stanley Baran and Dennis Davis which devote considerable attention to its theoretical value (Baran & Davis, 2000; Davis & Baran, 1981).

² A framing analysis of Operation Rescue abortion protest was carried out by Bergen, Reese and Mueller, 1994.

³ I obtained these materials when approached by the father's lawyer about serving as an expert witness. The background details, legal maneuverings, and questioning by the station's lawyers made the case illustrative to me of many of the issues discussed here.

⁴ Elsewhere, I have explored how source arrangements, or "networks," within television news programs acts to provide a "framework" for points of view (Reese, Grant & Danielian, 1994).

⁵ This is perhaps a classic case of one's research interests tracking life issues. Shortly after moving to Austin in 1982 I was warned to buy a house as quickly as possible for fear that prices would soar out of reach (as they were beginning to do). Not long after heeding that advice, the market collapsed leaving me and many others holding our real estate "bags." This rather helpless feeling set my professional curiosities to understanding how this had come about. One of my graduate seminars in 1990 tackled the growth and environment issue and reviewed local news coverage.

⁶ For a further analysis of the Forum's efforts in journalism education, see Reese (1999).

⁷ In the absence of illustrations here, the obligatory web site has extensive information and supporting visuals of the Newseum and other programs: www.freedomforum.org.

⁸ I was intrigued to find that independently I had reached impressions similar to those of Ted Friedman (1998), who following his deconstruction of Atlanta's World of Coca-Cola Museum (1992), prepared a review of the Newseum. Comparing our efforts shows that I gravitated toward a more "seamless" framing, while his considered the elements in tension embedded in "heroic objectivity."