

# The Hermeneutics of Frames and Framing: An Examination of the Media's Construction of Reality

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## Abstract

Frames are organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, and that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world. The study of framing has grown over the past decades as mass media has become more and more ubiquitous in society. People rely on media for information and access to local, national, and world events. This reliance on the media is important to address as news stories are essentially narratives and interpretations—By focusing on one aspect of an event and presenting it to an audience, media outlets construct reality. This construction operates by making certain aspects of stories more salient than others. This salience then “frames” an event and provides a reference point for viewers in which all subsequent information is judged upon. This article examines the current literature on framing and examines what techniques and methodologies are used by past and present sociologists and media scholars. Particular attention is given to the hermeneutics of frames, that is, how frames and framing influence individuals to interpret events in various ways.

## Keywords

media framing, frames, media sociology

## Introduction

Communication does not stand apart from reality. There is not, first, reality and then, second, communication. Communication participates in the formulization and change of reality.

—Richard Ericson (1998)

Hours after the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, media outlets scrambled to discover who was responsible; speculation abounded concerning which terrorist groups were likely culprits and what areas of the world were capable of harboring such organizations. The usual suspects were identified by every news network. Iraq, Afghanistan, and other Middle Eastern countries were mentioned as potential loci for those responsible. These countries were then presented to audiences as potential targets for a United States' retaliation. State of the art technology allowed the networks to cut directly to reporters stationed in the distant countries, and live interviews were carried out, made possible by satellite transmissions.

About 12:00 p.m. Pacific Standard Time, one network cut to a correspondent overseas (in a Middle Eastern country—I have forgotten which one). The correspondent was filmed on top of a building while bombs exploded in the distance. He then speculated that the United States had already begun retaliating. He turned away from the camera and pointed to the distance where visible explosions could be seen and

heard. The message conveyed from the correspondent was that the explosions were potentially the result of a United States' counterattack. The quick response was exclusively reported on the network (I do not believe any rival networks reported such news), no doubt to get the edge and be the first to report on the United States' military insurgence.

After this segment, the network went back to a reporter in New York to cover more on the wreckage of the fallen buildings. About an hour later, the network cut back to the reporter in the Middle East for an update; the reporter then *recanted* his initial speculation of U.S. retaliation by reporting instead that the bombs dropping in the distance were actually the result of a war between a neighboring country—a *daily* occurrence for the region and not out of the ordinary. In fact, attacks within the country had been occurring daily for years.

In retrospect, such a quick retaliation by the United States was not likely since information about those responsible was still obscure. However, the interesting aspect to this report was that for the hour after it was initially reported, it *seemed feasible, even likely* that the news was true. This framing of the event was powerful, albeit grossly misleading. Past

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research has focused on the mistreatment of similar events by the media (Durham, 1998; Reese & Buckalew, 1995). These studies, along with the example of how the media framed the events on September 11, 2001, showcase how the media construct reality.

### *The Growth of Media*

The past century witnessed unprecedented change in mass communications. The emergence of radio and television allowed messages and information to be transmitted instantaneously. With mass media's emergence came a new phenomenon; people more and more depended and relied on information gathered by individuals whom they have never met. This aspect of mass communications may seem a trivial part of contemporary American society, but to treat it as trivial ignores many important implications and assumptions implicit in modern media. People access information from media news services all the time. News is transmitted globally almost as soon as it occurs, if not concurrently. This increased reliance on mass media has spawned criticism and analysis by academics interested in communication theory; the hermeneutics of television, radio, and print media are ubiquitous in the literature on media and popular culture. Much of this literature addresses framing, or how the media creates and re-creates reality through the presentation of scripts, pictures, and contexts.

This article examines how the study of framing has evolved over time, and reviews previous and current work that addresses such phenomena. First, the mechanisms behind the social construction of reality are examined. A synopsis of Berger and Luckmann's work on social epistemology is presented as a foundation to understanding the sociology of frame analysis. Second, the definitions of frames and framing are summarized. Scholars have defined frames and frame analysis differently; this article addresses these disparities and treats each figure work as a part of the overall understanding of framing. Third, the history, research, and literature on frames and framing techniques are discussed. Particular aspects to framing, such as the ways in which the media distort events, how time and immediacy affect the construction of news, how stories are (or are not) placed within a historical context, and the psychology of framing are examined. Finally, empirical examples are given to illustrate how frames shape and construct social reality.

### *The Social Construction of Reality*

There is a vast literature on the social construction of reality. Berger and Luckmann's (1966) work set the bar for subsequent research, and their contribution needs to be mentioned prior to looking at the more specific manifestations of media framing.

In *The Social Construction of Reality*, Berger and Luckmann (1966) address the role of communication and the importance

of language for social organization. The central theme is that language is not only used by human beings as a means of communication, but it also serves as a *defining* aspect of humanity. The ability to develop language systems (verbal and nonverbal) is a unique factor that separates human beings from the animal kingdom.

Language and the ability to communicate through symbolic objectification not only are a determining factor of humanity but also play a crucial role in the organization of the social world. This organization is made possible through symbols and signs: "A special but crucially important case of objectivation is signification, that is, the human production of signs. A sign may be distinguished from other objectifications by its explicit intention to serve as an index of subjective meanings" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 35). Human social organization depends on this sign system: "Intersubjective sedimentation" can be called social *only* when it has been objectified in a sign system of one kind or another—that is, when the possibility of reiterated objectification of the shared experiences arises (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 67). The development of knowledge and language is at the core of society's fundamental dialectic. It "programs" the channels in which externalization produces an objective world, objectifying it through language and the cognitive apparatus based on language. In other words, it orders the world into objects that are in turn "apprehended," or seen as reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 66). Understanding the basic mechanisms to how meanings are constructed and shared is necessary before delving into the epistemology of framing. Berger and Luckmann (1966) rigorously analyze how reality is socially constructed. Their work provides the underpinnings for frame analysis.

Research on television provides an example of how Berger and Luckmann's (1966) work can be applied to understand contemporary media. G. E. Lang and Lang (1984; Lipschultz & Hilt, 1999) illustrate how television is used to shape viewers' perceptions of reality:

1. Television emphasizes close-up views creating a sense of familiarity with distant people and places.
2. Live event coverage gives viewers a sense of participation in public affairs.
3. Television pictures seem authentic to viewers.
4. Television coverage may provide a more complete picture of the event than any other media. (G. E. Lang & Lang, 1984, p. 26)

Television thus shapes perceptions in a way unique to the medium. Specifically, Berger and Luckmann's (1966) work help one understand how television frames segments of reality by producing images and messages that are seemingly complete. Given that people spend so much time watching television, it is no surprise how influential the medium can be. According to constructivist media effects

models, audiences rely on versions of reality built from personal experience, interaction with peers, and interpreted selections from the mass media (Neuman et al., 1992; Scheufele, 1999). The dynamic of the media (television and other forms of media) simply introduces additional filters for perceiving the social world.

Berger and Luckmann's (1966) work is relevant to all subsequent research on media framing. Tuchman's (1978) rhetoric resonates closely with the themes developed in *The Social Construction of Reality*: "The act of making news is the act of constructing reality itself rather than a picture of reality" (p. 12). Now that the ways in which humans construct reality has been briefly addressed, the more specific subject of frames and frame analysis is examined.

## Defining Frames: How Media Construct Reality

Frame analysis has its origins in sociology as well as media theory. Erving Goffman (1974) wrote extensively on the topic, and was one of the first sociologists to use frame analysis for explaining social phenomena. For Goffman, frames refer to the definitions of a situation that are built up in accordance with principles of organization, which govern social events and our subjective involvement in them. Frame analysis then refers to the examination of frames in terms of the organization of experience (Goffman, 1974). Entman offers another definition of frames:

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (Entman, 1993, p. 52, as quoted in McCombs & Ghanem, 2001, p. 70)

Frames help organize facts, and facts take on meaning by being embedded in some larger system of meaning or frame (Gamson et al., 1992). Frames provided references for the public about what is important, and the media has great power because of this.<sup>1</sup> A basic proposition to this is that the perceived salience of a public issue will be directly related to the amount of coverage given to that issue by the mass media (Holz & Wright, 1979). The following section gives a more detailed account of the nuances among definitions of frames and framing.

## The Framing Tradition

Past work on framing has used assorted definitions. Stephen D. Reese summarizes many of these definitions in "Prologue—Framing Public Life: A Bridging Model for Media Research" (Reese, Gandy, & Grant, 2001). For example, in Entman's previous definition of framing, frames are understood as those media images that focus on

one aspect of reality, elevating the importance of that reality. Another definition of frames is provided by Tankard et al. (1991): "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" (Reese, 2001, p. 10). Iyengar (1991) and Morley (1976) offer additional definitions of framing. For Iyengar, framing encompasses subtle alterations in a statement or a presentation of an issue, whereas Morley sees frames as "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" (Reese, 2001, p. 10).

Other contributors to the understanding of framing include Hall (1982), Gamson and Modigliani (1989), Goffman (1974), Edelman (1993), Hertog and McLeod (2001, 1995), Sieff (2003), Pan and Kosicki (1993), and Gitlin (1980). Hall treats frames as any presented material that sets a criterion for any future information; for example, if an event is initially framed in a context, then any future information regarding that event will be understood in the way it was initially framed. Gamson and Modigliani define frames as central organizing ideas that make sense of relevant events (Reese, 2001). Goffman's work reveals how frames classify phenomena, allowing the user to locate, perceive, identify, and label a potentially infinite number of occurrences (Reese, 2001). Edelman's conception of framing addresses how frames exert power in the way they are classified and categorized. Hertog and McLeod see frames as defining a context for an occurrence. Frames are used to interpret events and allow one to determine what information is useful or relevant for a situation. Sieff (2003) defines frames as the means by which media information is organized, presented, and interpreted. Pan and Kosicki (1993) view framing analysis as a constructivist approach to analyzing news discourse and practically functional dimensions. News discourse is a "sociocognitive process that involves sources, journalists, and audience members functioning in a shared culture according to socially defined roles" (Kosicki, 1993, p. 55).

Finally, Gitlin (1980) views frames as "the persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse" (p. 7). Gitlin emphasizes the routine organization that transcends any given story and is persistent over time, or any story that is resistant to change; for example, journalists use frames to recognize them as information and to assign them to "cognitive categories" (Gitlin, 1980, p. 21; Reese, 2001, p. 11). For Gitlin, this assignment to cognitive categories give frames a unique power, which actively brings an otherwise amorphous reality into a meaningful structure. This makes framing more than the simple inclusion or exclusion of information—frames are "active, information generating, as well as screening devices" (Reese, 2001, p. 11).

These definitions for frames and framings vary in their methodology and meaning. Perhaps the best definition for framing is offered by Reese (2001). For Reese, 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”; specifically, “frames are *organizing principles* that are socially *shared* and *persistent* over time, that work *symbolically* to meaningfully *structure* the social world” (Reese, 2001, p. 11). The author addresses each aspect of this definition systematically:

- *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 manifest 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.

Reese’s six aspects to framing are important to address in detail to understand how frames emerge, persist, and affect individuals and audiences. Because all previous definitions of frames resonate more or less with Reese’s definition, his work will be the focus here. He provides one of the best, systematic treatments of frames and framing effects.

**The Organization of Frames.** The initial question concerning a frame is whether the frame is successful in accounting for the social reality in which it represents. Frames can be *organized* in numerous ways. The organization of frames can be *examined* in numerous ways as well. Two ways to address and interpret frames are through *cognition* and *culture*:

Cognitively organized frames invite us to think about social phenomena in a certain way, often by appealing to basic psychological biases . . . “cultural” frames don’t stop with organizing one story, but invite 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. (Reese, 2001, pp. 12-13)

Examinations of frames must address the scope of the frame to determine how they organize, document, and explain reality. Specifically, frames should be addressed with the following questions in mind (Reese, 2001):

- In the representation of reality, how much framing is occurring?
- How adequate is the frame to contain the elements it proposes to embrace?
- How close 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?

Crucial to understanding how frames are organized is that frames are more than just the sum of the parts in a particular story. They add up to something bigger than an individual story because reports of events are usually in reference to previous or similar episodes. For example, a report on a burglary is not likely to be framed as an isolated event. It has potential to be linked to other burglaries or crime in general, which potentially attaches new meanings to the event. Therefore, frames can be organized around larger themes that can influence the interpretation of individual events.

**The Principles of Frames.** Treating frames as “principles” means that frames have abstract qualities: “Ultimately, frames may best be viewed as an abstract principle, tool, or ‘schemata’ of interpretation that works through media texts to structure social meaning” (Reese, 2001, p. 14). A frame may represent a sort of taxonomy which provides general references for specific manifestations or events. The abstract principles allow the media and audiences to organize information. While frames organize information, they are inevitably part of a much larger set of structures (or social ideology) that finds its emergence 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 (Gitlin, 1980; Reese, 2001).

An important thing to keep in mind when addressing media frames and interpretations of events is exactly what constitutes something *as* an event. Events are socially constructed, and do not exist in a vacuum, so to speak. An occurrence must be first labeled as an event, and then such an event can potentially be framed. This is a crucial point to consider when examining media framing. After such occurrences are defined as events, framing can further blur objective reality. The abstract principles of framing are used by news media; doing so shifts the objective occurrence into a subjective event. Reese summarizes the abstraction of framing:

[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 reality. These moments being fluid makes it risky for us to fix at one point in time that happens to be most visible, such as in a news story. (Reese, 2001, p. 15)



*The Sharing of Frames.* Frames structure reality, and they do so with shared meaning. An event is interpreted by those who witness it, and then conveyed to others in various forms (pertaining to media, frames are shared through written, visual, or auditory messages [or a combination of all three]). Given the fact that frames are shared and that they must be shared “in order to be useful and noteworthy organizing devices,” frames must be examined in terms of the degree to which they are shared (Reese, 2001, p. 15). Addressing the extent of how frames are communicated and shared between people helps determine the nature of the frame. Frames can be personal and idiosyncratic, social and shared, or cultural (if the frames are broadly connected to many people; Reese, 2001). An example of this is provided by Neuman, Just, and Crigler (1992) in a study that examined the shared meaning of frames. What was found was that news media used different frames than what audiences identified with—News media generally used tactical frames (such as “conflict” and “powerlessness”), whereas audience members “relied on such frames as ‘human impact’ and ‘moral values’” (Reese, 2001). Basic to understanding the connection of shared meaning with regard to frames is that the acceptance and sharing of a media frame depends on what understandings the individual brings to the “text” to produce negotiated meaning (Reese, 2001).

*The Persistence of Frames.* Frames are most influential when they persist over time. The persistence, or ongoing repetition of frames, creates meanings that are resistant to change. If constantly inundated with information that is framed in a specific way, an individual is likely to treat that framed referent of reality as reality itself. By routinizing frames, they become engrained in one’s conscience as reference points. Future information concerning similar events will be processed and compared with past events, which are interpreted through frames. Information is filtered by using past events that trigger conceptualization of reality as it has been previously framed. The more persistent the frame, the more the frame is used as a comparator for new information:

Routinization suggests that a frame has a second-nature, well entrenched, and built into the way of doing things . . . 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. (Reese, 2001, p. 16)

*The Symbolic Nature of Frames.* Frames work symbolically in how they are manifested and communicated in their various forms (Reese, 2001). The symbolism of frames is one of the most important aspects to how frames operate. Much research has been done that examines how symbols influence audiences through framing techniques. Symbolism in framing is

likened to the metaphor of an iceberg; the obvious texts that are visible are only part of the message conveyed through frames (Reese, 2001). Content is only the tip of the iceberg, symbolic representations are communicated at levels many times far below the “surface.”

By structuring frames within symbolic contexts, media outlets exclude information that does not fit: “[T]he way we emphasize symbolic content and handle its measurement structures the conclusions we may reach about framing” (Reese, 2001, p. 17). Viewpoints can be inferred by the framing of an issue. For example, Reese (2001) uses the abortion debate to illustrate this point. Stories concerning abortion can be couched as pro-life or pro-choice. Framing abortion as such might define the themes to the audience as a dichotomous issue, but there could be other perspectives. Reese explains further how treating a story like abortion in this manner can be problematic:

[One] 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? (Reese, 2001, p. 17)

Such questions are important to pose when analyzing frames and their symbolic representations.

*The Structure of Framing.* When media frame events, they structure the social world. These structures involve patterns that emerge from any number of symbolic devices (Reese, 2001). When an issue is originally framed, patterns may not exist. However, as media cover issues regarding the original event thereafter, frames become dominant structures that affect interpretation (examples of how frames gain in complexity and coherence of structure over time are illustrated later in this article). Gamson’s (1992) work focuses on the way that frame metaphors draw attention to subjects, that is, how the principles of organization create coherent meanings by “combining symbols, giving them relative emphasis, and attaching them to larger cultural ideas” (Reese, 2001, p. 17). Frames are embedded and complex, and are not conducive for examination as single indicators. This is not to confuse the ability to define the frame, which can vary from easy to difficult depending on the subject, but rather to affirm that frames are structural manifestations, which order the interpretation of reality.

News media organize stories; frame structures

call attention to the internal organization within news stories . . . 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. (Reese, 2001, p. 19)

To sum up the definitions and characteristics of frames and framing devices, frames convey meanings that are organized, abstract (or principled), shared, usually persistent, symbolic, and structured. Next, specific aspects of framing are discussed as examined in the literature.

### *Rhetoric as Framing-in-Praxis*

An additional aspect of framing regards *rhetoric*, both in everyday interactions and in more structured organizational domains. Rhetoric regards the manner in which one speaks as a means of communication or persuasion. When one considers the art of persuasion as a combination of context and language, one can see that the art of rhetoric relies heavily on framing. What elements are included in rhetoric—and just as importantly what elements are excluded—serve to frame arguments in specific ways and make some meanings more salient than others.

Politicians learn early on the power of rhetoric in their political strategies. How one frames a social issue can be the sole determinant of how the public perceives the issue. For example, gay marriage is a controversial issue that is currently being debated in public discourse. One can argue—quite persuasively—for or against gay marriage. The way one frames such an argument can greatly influence one's response to that argument. By framing gay marriage as a threat to the American family, one attaches a meaning structure that invokes specific emotions. To be “for gay marriage” then becomes being “against America.” On the other hand, framing the opposition of gay marriage as a civil right infraction akin to discriminatory practices of America's past creates an entirely different persuasive stance. Denying one the right of matrimony based on sexual orientation then labels one a bigot. This example illustrates that framing can occur in many different domains—even in the simple contexts of everyday life. Rhetoric thus plays a key element in how frames are defined in social environments. Frames are not just visual: They are embedded in language itself.

## **Research and Literature on Frames and Framing**

### *Distortion*

One aspect to how the media construct reality concerns the distortion of events. Unless one holds an extremely postmodern view about the nature of reality, events occur in an objective manner; when a dog bites a man, there is direct, causal evidence that logically follows—A bite exists where it once did not and the bite is the result of the dog attacking the man. Such a common occurrence seems so simple that any interpretation of the event apart from the dog biting the man in temporal order seems improbable. Yet, it is important to understand that the reporting of such events *requires interpretation*, and interpretation can lead to misrepresentations

of objective reality. This becomes clearer for media outlets as many times those reporting and broadcasting events are not there to witness them. Accounts of the event are usually taken from those involved, and those involved are likely to have varying interpretations of what unfolded. Our simple example of a dog biting a man can potentially be tricky because of discordant interpretations. In addition, an account and broadcast of such an event will only have the man's version of the story; dogs cannot speak. One can see how such a simple, trivial event can be misconstrued and presented subjectively. Because of this, the presentation of events by the media always risks distorting what really occurred.

David Altheide's (1976) work addresses media distortion. For Altheide, “events become news when transformed by the news perspective, and not because of their objective characteristics” (p. 173). He cites the Watergate scandal as an example of how the media can distort the meanings of events, arguing that “Nixon fell from power because the news perspective transformed the series of events of Watergate into a whole, which was then used as evidence of corruption and immorality” (Altheide, 1976, p. 154). The Watergate events occurred over time, and each breaking story built on previous ones. Altheide's point is to show the difficulty of continually presenting stories objectively as they build on one another. An initial story about an event might be quite objective and accurately representative of reality, but as individual stories emerge that attempt to explain a greater event, framing more and more becomes an aspect of news production.

Altheide does have critics, however. M. G. Dunn (1977) claims that such representations of the media are irresponsible. For instance, framing the Watergate scandal as a moral story in which the fabric of society is altered is not necessarily a distortion of the events. The actions of those who participated in the Watergate break-in and cover up were operating immorally; therefore, media representation of the events as immoral should not be problematic. Regardless of the media's treatment of this specific example, the potential of distorting events and misinterpreting information is always a factor. The distortion of the truth is one way that reality can be framed by the media.

### *Time*

Time is an important aspect to understanding how media (especially news media) construct reality. It is obvious that media outlets work in a temporal setting in which deadlines are common. It is not as obvious how such constraints influence the ways that media affects an audiences' perceptions. Sociologists such as Emile Durkheim and Max Weber addressed time as a contextual phenomenon. For Durkheim, time is an objectified product—a result of social interaction and social life rather than an a priori category; Weber examined time as a crucial component in Western capitalism—a scarce commodity that represented earning potential (Schlesinger, 1977). Both sociologists, while long gone,

offer insight on how the media shape reality. Because broadcasts are limited by time and stories take time to develop and present, media outlets filter and redefine the temporal sense of what is real.

An example of this is provided by contemporary news media. Immediacy is a premium for news outlets of all sorts; television, radio, and print media all depend on the alacrity of sources, reporters, camera teams, editors, and technicians to produce stories. Philip Schlesinger (1977) provides an insight to the importance and impact of immediacy:

It is clear that there is a systematic relationship between the time concepts which comprise part of the newsman's occupational knowledge and the demands created by the organization of work. But the newsman's conception of time is more than just a response to the constraints posed by the newsday production cycle . . . Immediacy is to be measured as a true *virtue*. (Schlesinger, 1977, pp. 348-349, emphasis added)

This mention of immediacy as a virtue is important to understand how time influences newsmakers production of reality. Time here becomes a goal; it is woven into the fabric on the institution of news production. Because it is such a premium, the types of stories and the way in which they are presented are always within a temporal context. For television and radio, stories are selected and drafted for presentation according to time slots. These time slots have been standardized; television and radio allot time for hard news, soft news, sports, market reports, and so on. Therefore, when an audience is engaged in a media, broadcast reality is constructed based on time allocation of specific subjects.

**Historical Context.** A final aspect to how time affects the social construction of reality deals with media and historical context. More and more, news media operate in the present and do not attach meaning to events as an effect of prior historical causes:

News, as it emerges each day, and as it is conceived, stands in radical opposition to history. Indeed, the system of newsday cycles has a tendency to abolish historical awareness, creating a perpetual series of foregrounds at the expense of depth and background. In philosophical terms, we could argue that to be obsessed with a particular duration (the day) has come to overburden the awareness of sequence. (Schlesinger, 1977, p. 349)

Very little news occurs randomly or outside of historical context, especially when considering national network news. Nonetheless, because of time constraints, space limitations, and other institutionalized boundaries specific to media, events cannot always be contextualized sequentially. Television, radio, and print media usually do not have the time nor space to fully develop every story as part of a greater context that has its place in history or other events. Because of this, stories are framed apart from their whole, making certain aspects more salient than others.

## The Psychology of Framing

To this point, framing has been discussed as a media phenomenon. However, frames and the effects of the media on individuals vary. Framing plays the same role in analyzing media discourse that schema does in cognitive psychology; each is a central organizing principle that holds together and gives coherence and meaning to a diverse array of symbols (Gamson et al., 1992). Psychologically, frames maintain a useful "tension" or "balance" between structure and agency (framing bridges the gap between cognition and culture)—events and experiences are framed, and we frame events and experiences (Gamson et al., 1992; Goffman, 1974). Frames and the media's construction of reality influence public opinion, but to what extent? The following discussion examines susceptibility and mechanisms that sway public opinion.

Frames are not to be linked or likened directly with suggestion, or more specifically *persuasion*. Framing of events is more subtle and involves a psychological component that is removed from "message level" communication;

Frames are distinct not only at the message level but at the psychological level as well . . . frames differ from other message forms not just in their overt structure and substance but also in the way the affect popular thinking about public affairs. (Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson, 1997, p. 223)

Frames also work psychologically by generating more or less cognitive responses from individuals concerning social phenomena (Shah et al., 2004).

The way an event is framed by the media can be interpreted in various ways, specifically frames can be "episodic" or "thematic" (Bullock, Fraser, & Williams, 2001; Iyengar, 1990; Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson, 1997). "Episodic" frames focus on individual cases and encourage an audience to make *internal* attributions for events (Nelson et al., 1997, p. 224). For example, viewers presented with a news broadcast concerning a societal issue such as the homeless will be inclined to blame the problem on individual motivation. Homelessness is interpreted as resulting from a lack of effort by people that refuse to assimilate and work in the greater society. One the other hand, "thematic" frames focus more on broader social issues, such as social, political, and economic forces; these frames encourage viewers to make *external* attributions (Nelson et al., 1997, p. 225). Using the previous example, homelessness in the context of a thematic frame would be interpreted as resulting from forces in society much greater than the individual. The homeless are not destitute because of their lack of effort or unwillingness to work but rather because of economic and political forces that suppress them. Each of these framing techniques is a powerful mechanism that influences viewers.

**Framing and Belief Structures.** A distinction needs to be made about how the psychology of framing operates apart from

persuasive messages and belief structures. Nelson et al. (1997; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Zaller, 1992, 1994) offer a description of how belief structures operate:

[T]he standard model of communication-based persuasion typically involves a source who presents a message about an attitude object to an audience. If the audience member both understands and believes the message, and the message is discrepant from his or her prior attitude, then the attitude should change in the direction implied by the message. (Nelson et al., 1997, p. 225)

Belief structures operate under the implicit assumption that the audience is unaware of the content of the message. Communicators that influence audiences are presenting new information, that is, information that “contains positive or negative information about the attitude object *not already part of the recipients’ knowledge or belief structure*” (Nelson et al., 1997, p. 225). Framing effects are different in that they are not connected to preexisting information; frames operate by activating information that exists in the individual’s stocks of knowledge. The mechanism here is much more subtle than persuasion. Persuasion techniques attempt to shift an individual’s opinion from one stance to another by providing new information. Framing effects redefine opinions or perceptions.

The power and interpretation of belief messages and framing depends on the type of individual. People vary in terms of their ability to accept or resist information as representative of reality. This variance is a function of sophistication (Nelson et al., 1997). The more sophisticated an individual, the less susceptible they are to being persuaded by messages (messages likened to belief structures). For example, moderately sophisticated people are more likely to be persuaded because they are capable of receiving and comprehending messages, but may not have the ability to resist the messages. On the other hand, sophisticated people can generally receive and comprehend messages yet be unaffected by the persuasion due to a greater ability to differentiate the meaning of media messages (Nelson et al., 1997). While the ability of the sophisticated to resist temptation is seen as a function of belief structures, Nelson et al. (1997) tested whether framing effects are similar, that is, whether an individual’s level of sophistication mattered when presented with framed media information. The authors hypothesized that sophistication would be irrelevant concerning framing effects and the ways individuals interpret framed messages: “[U]nlike standard persuasion models, framing effects do not depend upon the recipient’s acceptance of the message’s assertions . . . more- and less-sophisticated subjects do not differ in their comprehension of framed messages” (Nelson et al., 1997, pp. 227-228). Sophistication does not dampen framing effects because framing operates by making particular considerations more salient. This salience in turn creates

a susceptibility to messages that are not more influential on the unsophisticated, in fact potentially the opposite. The more sophisticated may be *more affected* by framing because such individuals are more likely to have preexisting knowledge that is aligned with the content of the frame.

These aspects to framing reveal the psychological mechanisms behind framing in ways that are perhaps counterintuitive. Nelson et al.’s work delineates how framing operates in subtle, sometimes odd ways to shape elements of reality. Aside from the psychological impact of frames, another important dynamic to remember is that frames are communicated through *stories*. Stories are simply narratives, which are discussed in the following section, using deviance as an example of how news stories frame the world.

### *Deviance: How Narratives Create a World of Conflict*

Journalists, reporters, and editors work together to produce news. News production involves the delivery of information, and information must be written before it can be transmitted. Since the news is written, journalists are essentially telling stories about what events occur. Such narrations are usually framed in a certain context; they represent reality subjectively rather than objectively. From this understanding, a frame represents a storyline or “unfolding narrative” about an issue; “Narratives are organizations of experience . . . They bring order to events by making them something that can be told about; they have power because make the world make sense” (Gamson et al., 1992; Manoff, 1987). In sociological terms, journalists tell stories within a narrative framework that has salience in popular reality (Ericson, 1998; Goffman, 1974; Hartley, 1996).

An example of how such narratives frame reality and skew the objectivity of reality is found in the content of news. By and large, many news stories tend to involve deviance of some ilk. Crime stories are very common on television and in print media; in fact, they are ubiquitous. It is probably a safe assumption that most people do not experience crime in their lives proportionately to what is presented on the nightly news or is written in daily newspapers. If one doubts this assertion, then it is even more questionable whether the audience who reads, watches, and listens to the news experiences such ratio of crime and deviant behavior (most people [specifically Americans] who are drawn to print news and television news are more likely to live away from locations where violent crimes commonly occur, for example, Americans view images of war and terrorism daily but rarely are confronted with them). Because of such an emphasis on deviance in news stories, the news often frames the world in a negative fashion. One’s lens to the world, as presented through the news media, is a filtered vision of conflict, violence, and instability. The similarities of ordinary experience and narratives that shape reality are discordant.



## Examples of Media Framing

### *Framing in Politics*

There are many examples of how the media has framed events in contexts other than reality. The incident where Democratic candidate Howard Dean rallied an audience during a campaign speech provides an example of media framing. Those in attendance during the rally were not moved in the same way as those who viewed news coverage of the event. The media framing of the event portrayed Dean as a raving lunatic who incited the crowd to a maddening frenzy. Television broadcasts focused in on Dean's face and torso, and thus thematically set the tone of the event. Dean's appearance on film was removed from others. The perspective of him in relation to the crowd created a much different image for those watching on television. The impact of the event was massive—Dean's on screen meltdown was the image that lingered in people's minds, and will likely be part of his legacy. The media had a major impact on how Dean was presented, and the framing of the event was discordant with the interpretation of those who witnessed it in person.

Another classic example of media framing is provided by K. Lang and Lang (1953). As evident in the previous example, public events are often interpreted differently by those in attendance compared with those that view coverage on television. "MacArthur Day" in Chicago offers a perfect example of this. MacArthur's arrival was seen as a significant event, and media coverage portrayed it as such. However, for those in attendance, the impact of the event was discordant with those that witnessed its coverage on television. A close inspection of the event reveals how and why the discordance occurred:

Examination of a public event by mass-observation and by television revealed considerable discrepancy between these two experiences. The contrast in perspectives points to three items whose relevance in structuring a televised event can be inferred from an analysis of the television content. (K. Lang & Lang, 1953, p. 10)

These three items included the following: (a) The *arbitrary sequencing* of the event structured the event in terms of foreground and background. This created a technological bias is the determination of what was important (from the perspective of television personnel). (b) The *structuring* of the event by an announcer greatly affected the perceptions of those watching the event on television. Announcers' commentary allows the viewer to maintain a particular perspective while images shift rapidly from scene to scene. Viewers gain a stable orientation this way. Commentary in television media is even more salient in contemporary news stories because of the ultrarapid shifts of images common in today's news broadcasts. (c) *Reciprocal effects* allowed the media to modify the event itself by "staging it in a way to make it more suitable for telecasting and creating among the actors

the consciousness of acting for a larger audience" (K. Lang & Lang, 1953, p. 10). As the authors astutely noted about MacArthur day, the event was transformed into a drama that focused (or framed) specific aspects for the audience. The media in this example presented the event as a drama that was disconnected from the reality of those who experienced it. Whether intentional or not, news media construct reality by constituting an event as news (Duhe & Zoch, 1994; Lester, 1980; Tuchman, 1976).

The way the media affect public opinion about politics in general is also interesting (Zaller, 1992, 1994). Recent research has suggested that news media, by framing news in negative ways, have influenced the general demeanor of the public toward political issues and politics in general (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996; Conrad, 1997).

### *Framing in Sports*

Another example of media framing comes from sporting events. Recent news on professional athletics provides examples of media framing. The past decades have proven turbulent for professional sports regarding players using illegal substances. Various professional athletes have paid fines, served suspensions, and served jail time for violating league drug policies, ranging from banned substances (anabolic steroids, growth hormones, etc.) to narcotics (illicit, controlled substances such as cocaine, marijuana, and other drugs). Recently, steroids and growth hormones have been the center of many news stories concerning professional sports, specifically those related to Major League Baseball. The issue of steroids and performance enhancing drugs has received so much attention that even President George W. Bush addressed it in a state of the union address. Bush proclaimed that the time had come for professional sports to, once and for all, clean up their act and make strides to eliminate the abuse of steroids by athletes.

An interesting aspect to the reporting on steroids and athletes that use steroids has been the way in which such stories are framed. One way to interpret an athlete who uses steroids is that he or she has broken the law—many steroids and growth hormones are not only banned by professional sports organizations but are illegal to possess, use, or distribute. This interpretation frames the athlete who abuses such a substance as a criminal, one who has knowingly broken the law by engaging in illegal activities. However, this is not the way in which the media has framed the abuse of steroids. Athletes are not usually arrested when they test positive for steroids or are caught with them, as they might be if they possessed amounts of marijuana or cocaine. Instead, such athletes are reprimanded and disciplined by the commissioner in their respective leagues. This fact greatly affects the way that the media thematically frame steroid use. Such stories are placed within a context apart from those that concern drug use and abuse; athletes that are caught using steroids are not criminals, instead they are seen as disgracing themselves *and the*

*game in which they play.* The latter aspect to this is what is most interesting and reveals the power of media framing. A very different interpretation is applied to such athletes' behavior, one that places their action not at the *individual* level but at the *group* level.

The framing of steroid use as affecting the "integrity of the game" is ubiquitous in sports media. Such sound bytes are often attached to such stories, and when new events occur an audience understands it as a contamination of the purity of the sport rather than as a criminal offense; this interpretation is perpetuated by framing. Many news stories that relate to sports are framed differently than stories concerning politics or other themes. Using frame analysis reveals how events can be defined in very different terms, even though they might have similar elements and relate to similar aspects of reality.

### ***Framing and Health***

Another example of media framing concerns reports of epidemics. When new illnesses are discovered, especially those that are suspected of being caused by air-borne viruses, they are reported by mass media. Such reports tend to frame such events in ways that create paranoia and great concern in the general public. Specific examples of this include the media's coverage of the SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) breakout and the anthrax scare after the terrorist attacks on the United States. Both events were newsworthy for obvious reasons; each involved issues that are potentially relevant to every human being on the planet and each had great immediacy. Retrospectively, the attention given to each by U.S. media was not proportional to the actual impact of the phenomenon. Comparatively few people were affected by the so-called outbreak of either anthrax or SARS, even though each event was framed with the understanding that great danger was imminent. SARS was not the epidemic in which it was framed, and less than 10 people died from anthrax in America. The framing of these events is understandable; they deal with the unknown. The interest here is that the framing of such events creates an interpretation of reality. After all, what has proven more dangerous, events such as SARS and anthrax or other problems such as heart disease? Heart disease kills many more people than did SARS or anthrax, yet it is framed in a different way. It is interesting to compare frames; doing so reveals how powerful the media is in presenting certain aspects of reality. The importance of events can be obscure or misplaced by the way that events are framed and the context in which they are placed.

### ***The Variance of Framing Techniques Across Media***

In concluding this discussion of the examples of media framing, it is important to address how individual media frame reality in distinctive ways. For example, newspapers

frame events in ways that are unique to print media. Stories in newspapers are given precedence by their placement within the paper. The more pressing, "important" stories are usually placed at the top of each page, and the most pertinent stories of the day are located on the front page. In addition, readers are given cues that signify a story's importance; word placement, font size, and color all provide references for a story's level of impact and importance. These techniques frame reality by providing cues and making certain types of events more salient than others (e.g., war and conflict are often salient visions of reality in print media).

Television frames reality in different ways. Televised news broadcasts also involve narratives that tell stories, similar to the way that print media use texts, but television also frames moving images. To understand this better, consider a panoramic view of an ocean sunset. The image spans a great distance from left to right, and also from top to bottom. If one were to hold up an empty picture frame in front of them, the image within the frame becomes far different from the original. The setting sun may still be in the picture, but the dying light and the emerging shadows that were on the far left and right are removed. Only a segment of the whole picture is revealed. This analogy works for framing on television. Images are focused and cropped; they are chosen for emphasis and in doing so filter the complete picture from the audience. Therefore, framing in television broadcasts has the added dynamic of image distortion. Such aspects of framing apply to newspapers as well, as print media use still pictures that are cropped to fit, but television is most characterized by such framing effects due to the nature of the medium. These dynamics must be considered to understand the devices behind media framing.

### **Conclusion**

This article has examined frames and media framing as mechanisms of the social construction of reality. Marshal McLuhan's famous aphorism, "the medium is the message" may be a simplistic way of understanding the power of the media in shaping an audience's perception of reality, but "media" do present information that is framed, and therefore the "messages" can be powerful and persuasive. In summing up this discussion of framing, it is important to reiterate some of the critical components of frame analysis and framing in general.

The study of framing is concerned with how meanings are transmitted across media. While frames are not always identifiable, and the power of their impact is debatable, frames do make certain elements of stories more salient, and therefore can potentially influence audiences (the level of impact for salient portrayals of reality is also questionable however). The media do have powerful impacts on social and political issues; the salience of frames for these issues generally has influence on public opinion. Frames that focus on interpersonal and personal agendas do not have the same impact;

media frames of this ilk do not have as great of an effect on people. Therefore, while frames and framing can influence the public, they are not to be understood as mechanisms of unabated power.

Frames are embedded in culture, inside people's minds, and within the agendas of the media. Frames are found in all types of media, from print to broadcast news, and they convey meaning through the interaction between the reader and the text (these meanings are not in the text *per se*, but rather already existent in the mind of the reader of the text). Frames are socially shared, and therefore must have resonance for both those producing a message and those receiving it. They are (usually) persistent and perpetual. Implicit in understanding how frames construct reality is that they leave out as much or more than what they include. In other words, they provide only a segment of objective reality. All frames then are subjective interpretations, or emphases of reality.

This article has attempted to both review the literature on framing and couch the literature in a few common themes. Examples from the media, politics, and everyday life have been provided that showcase how the framing process operates at different levels of analysis and in different social domains. The examples also reveal the power of frames in defining communications and as rhetorical, persuasive devices. While frames and framing are mostly addressed by academics who study communications, it behooves everyone to understand the basic elements of framing. It is crucial now more than ever for one to consider framing strategies used by the media, as individuals in society more and more rely on media outlets for information. By understanding the way frames relate to the acquisition of knowledge, one can become a more informed citizen and consumer.

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### Note

1. It should be mentioned that the power of media frames is debatable. Media frames tend to be more influential in some ways than others. For example, frames that deal with public opinion issues such as politics can be powerful, yet other frames such as those that deal with personal agendas are less so.

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