

Framing Theory: From Philosophical Roots to Practical Applications

Dolapo Michael OYEDOKUN

School of Communication Studies,

Ohio University, Athens OH, USA

oyedokundolapo@gmail.com // +234 902 893 6761

Abstract

As a theoretical construct, framing explores how the creation, structure and presentation of information significantly shapes public perception and interpretation. Framing, although emerged from Sociology and Psychology, has since been applied across humanities and social sciences. As mostly used in Communication and Media Studies, framing theory suggests that the media directs attention (agenda setting) toward specific societal events and subsequently contextualizes them (second-level agenda setting) within a broader framework of significance. News gatekeepers often justify these selections as a process of controlling information to ensure accuracy, fairness, relevance, newsworthiness, legal compliance, before it reaches the public through the media. Undoubtedly, social media platforms have democratized information dissemination and empowered the public to participate in shaping public discourse as well. Through a critical examination of the strengths and weaknesses of framing theory, this paper offers valuable insights into the complex interplay between media, audience, and societal outcomes. The implications of framing theory for understanding contemporary communication landscapes and its potential for present and future research are also discussed.

Keywords: Communication Studies, Framing Theory, Media Frames, Public Opinion, Robert Entman, Social Media

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Introduction

Framing is a communication concept used to explain how individuals perceive and interpret information based on the way the information is presented. It is believed that the way information is framed, or presented can influence the way people think about and react to such information. Framing includes the language used, the context in which the information is presented, and the images or symbols associated with it. Framing plays a pivotal role in shaping social reality by influencing the perspectives through which individuals perceive the world (Hallahan, 1999). Framing can also be defined as the process through which individuals interpret or adjust their perspectives on an issue (Chong & Druckman, 2007). It involves the strategic presentation of information to accentuate specific aspects of an event, incorporating subjective interpretations, evaluations, and recommendations to enhance its portrayal (Wu, 2023). The central idea of framing is that an issue can be examined from multiple perspectives and interpreted as having significance for different beliefs or considerations.

In addition to these foundational conceptual definitions, framing presents a rich and multifaceted landscape for exploration. The rest of this paper delves into the various dimensions of framing as a theory, examining its origins and evolution as a prominent communication concept. The philosophical underpinnings that have shaped framing theory are explored, along with practical evaluations of its applicability in diverse contexts. Furthermore, this paper investigates the theory's utilization across different areas of research, shedding light on its versatility and interdisciplinary relevance. The key assumptions underlying framing theory were scrutinized, accompanied by an analysis of critiques and limitations that have been levied against it. Additionally, this paper explores these multifaceted aspects to offer a comprehensive understanding of framing theory and its implications for Communication scholarship and practice.

Origin and Evolution of Framing

As a paper that intends to explore and assess a theory, it is expected that a traceable genealogical background is established. The concept of framing was first posited in the year 1955 by Gregory Bateson who in his sociological origins argues that communication only gets meaning in its context and the message is being constructed or framed (Bateson, 1955). Again in 1972, Bateson defines psychological frames as a “spatial and temporary bounding of set of interactive messages” (Bateson, 1972, p. 197) that operates as a form of *metacommunication*. Ervin Goffman (1974) in his *Frame Analysis* defines frames as "schemata of interpretation," which enable individuals to contextualize information and facilitate the processes of locating, perceiving, identifying, and labelling events and situations in their social world.

Goffman argued that frames manifest in two forms termed non-transforming and transforming, respectively, with Goffman labelling the former primary frameworks, further divided into natural and social categories, which represent inherent background perceptions about human existence. Natural frameworks describe events as physical occurrences, taking natural statements literally and not attributing social influences on event causation (Persson, 2019). Under the natural frameworks, “occurrences [are] seen as undirected, unoriented, unanimated, unguided, and purely physical” (Goffman, 1974, p. 22). The social frameworks comprise elements subject to human volition, including laws, rules, norms, habits, power dynamics, cultural practices, institutions, and organizations, where human control is exerted in an abstracted, mediated, and indirect manner. That is, events are socially driven occurrences caused by the desires, goals, and manipulation of other social players (people).

Gamson, et al., (1982) also employed the framing concept analytically to explore conditions where authority is perceived as unjust and contested, defining frames as "interpretative packages" centered around

an organizing idea. Goffman's *Frame Analysis* (1974), which is based on Gregory Bateson's earlier work (1972), is rooted in the symbolic interactionist and constructionist notion that, as previously said, meanings emerge through interpretive processes mediated by culture. Frames, according to Bateson and Goffman, as well as other researchers who apply the idea analytically (Gamson et al., 1982), provide solutions to queries like: *What is going on here? What is being said? How should I (or we) act or respond?* (Snow, et al., 2019). The concept of framing having been researched over time due to its explanatory power and testability soon gained a theoretical status, originated in the field of psychology and sociology and has since been applied across various disciplines such as Communication, Journalism, Media Studies, and Political Science. At its core, framing theory refers to how information is presented or "framed" to influence the perceptions and decisions of individuals.

In Media Studies, the term "framing" is primarily used to analyze journalistic content, as D'Angelo (2017) points out. This concept has become increasingly important in communication research (de Vreese, 2005). Framing analysis serves a dual purpose: it helps us understand media content itself, and it sheds light on the connection between media and public opinion. However, one question comes to mind: *how did framing get introduced to Communication Studies?* While media framing theory cannot be completely attributed to a single author, Robert Entman is mostly credited with developing frame analysis and its introduction into Communication Studies. He defined framing as the act of selecting "some aspects of a perceived reality and making 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). This definition of framing in communication involves highlighting specific aspects of a perceived reality within a "text" to emphasize a particular understanding of an issue.

Entman improved his earlier definition of framing to "entails selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues and making connections among them to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, or solution" (Entman, 2003, p. 417). In comparing the two definitions by Robert Entman, we can observe the latter definition is more concise and straightforward. The latter definition broadens the scope of framing by including not only problem definition and causal interpretation but also evaluation and solution. Also, it emphasizes making connections among various facets of events or issues.

Framing Theory in Communication Studies

Ever since Robert Entman observed that frames are in communicators, texts, receivers, and culture. A host of overview articles and book chapters, and even a handful of empirical articles, have endeavoured to show the analytical components of the news framing process. Framing theory suggests that the media directs attention toward specific societal events and subsequently contextualizes them within a broader framework of significance (D'Angelo & Shaw, 2018). The idea of framing not only influences communication in interpersonal, group, organizational, and cultural settings, but also facilitate messages aimed at shaping perceptions and actions toward individuals, topics, and issues within those contexts (D'Angelo & Shaw, 2018). At first, studies operationalized framing in combination with other concepts such as agenda setting or priming (Iyengar, 1991; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Scheufele, 2000). McCombs, et al., (1997) in accepting that frames could influence the perception of the news by the audience noted that framing could be interpreted as second-level agenda-setting theory. Here, the media not only dictates what topics to be considered (agenda-setting theory) but also guides how those issues are perceived (second-level agenda-setting) (McCombs, 2005; Weaver, 2007).

Once again, citing Robert Entman, "unless the narratives are compared, frames are difficult to detect fully and reliably, because many of the

framing devices can appear as “natural,” unremarkable choices of words or images, (Entman, 1991, p. 6). Thus, early framing scholars have provided framing devices of how the media package issues. These include metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, depictions, and visual images (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) also identified metaphors, stories (myths, legends), traditions (rituals, ceremonies), slogans (jargon and catchphrase), artefacts, contrast, and spin (value judgement or biases). Tankard (2001) then proposed the most comprehensive empirical approach to framing analysis by outlining a list of 11 framing mechanisms or focal points that can be used to identify and measure news frames: headlines, subheads, photos, photo captions, leads, source selection, quotes selection, pull quotes, logos, statistics and charts, and concluding statements and paragraphs.

In a different dimension, Shanto Iyengar (1991) in his analysis of television frames of political issues defined two broad types of framing: episodic and thematic. The episodic framing focuses on a single event; that is, the presentation and portrayal of issues through either a specific event that serves as an anecdotal exemplification of the broader issue or the story of an affected person who could put a human face on the issue. The thematic framing is more generic as it focuses on trends over time by applying a wide-angle lens to the coverage of the issue, thereby highlighting contexts and environments (Iyengar, 1991). A good example of an episodic frame will be a news outlet reporting a specific heatwave linked to climate change, and interviewing a family displaced by floods (episodic). Analyzing rising global temperatures over decades, discussing the science behind climate change and potential solutions then becomes the broader view (thematic) (Iyengar, 1991).

Philosophical Assessment of Framing Theory

After establishing the historical development of the framing theory, it is pertinent to trace the philosophical assessment, that is, the ontology (nature of reality and existence), the axiology (values and ethics) and

the epistemological (nature of knowledge) assumptions (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). Starting with the ontological considerations, Goffman (1974) theorized that there is an objective reality that exists independently of how it is portrayed, however, these natural occurrences are also reconstructed through social interactions and interpretations. According to McQuail (1994), the media is traditionally assumed to have a substantial impact on the audience, but this view needs to be re-evaluated. There have been major shifts in how communication is understood over the years, and the media's influence might be more complex than originally thought. While scholars like McQuail (1994) emphasize the media's potent role in constructing social reality by framing information in a particularized manner (p. 331), others, such as Scheufele (1999), posit limitations on this influence. The latter perspective highlights the interactive nature of the media-audience relationship, suggesting that recipients actively engage with and interpret media messages, thus complicating the notion of a singular, determinative media effect.

Robert Entman later refines the understanding of media framing by explaining how it equips audiences with frameworks for interpreting events. He defines framing as choosing specific aspects of reality and emphasizing them within a message to promote a particular interpretation of an issue (Entman, 1993; 2003). Thus, framing acknowledges that actors such as strategic communicators, journalists, and audience members all choose some parts of a certain subject to emphasize while ignoring others. That is, the way news is being framed and presented can significantly influence how audiences perceive the events being reported. However, the audience also have the liberty to accept the media frames or interpret the information through their existing frames of reference. Especially in the age of media literacy where people are aware of the natural and social context as debated by Ervin Goffman and can easily make certain choices.

In framing theory, the axiological considerations involve examining the ethical implications of how information is framed. This includes questions about the values and biases inherent in framing choices made by communicators, as well as the potential ethical responsibilities of journalists and media professionals in presenting information to the public. Shanto Iyengar's (1991) analysis of U.S. network news coverage from 1981 to 1986 revealed a significant bias towards episodic framing when reporting on social issues like poverty, crime, and unemployment. This means the news focused heavily on individual events or stories (e.g., a specific crime incident or a single homeless person) rather than placing these issues within a broader context or exploring underlying trends (thematic framing). Frames play several crucial roles in interpretive work: they function as picture frames, directing attention by delineating what is "in-frame" and what is "out-of-frame" in our sensory field.

Additionally, frames serve as articulation mechanisms, weaving together disparate elements of a scene to convey a coherent set of meanings (Snow, et al., 2019). In photojournalism, the technical link between framing and photography suggests that photojournalists may consider analytical aspects of framing. Photographs demand strong composition and meaningful communication, leading photo editors and staff to crop images, provide captions, and position them alongside published stories, both in print and online (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). These scholars (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009; Snow et al., 2019) appear to be arguing in support of journalist frames for "Information gatekeeping."

Information gatekeeping refers to the process by which information is selected and controlled before it reaches the public through news outlets. This selection process is performed by media gatekeepers, who can be editors, publishers, or broadcasters to ensure accuracy, fairness, relevance, newsworthiness, legal compliance, etc. (McQuail, 1994;

Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Looking at the ethics of news framing, one can tell that they are crucially intertwined with the values, biases, and responsibilities inherent in shaping public discourse. While framing serves to contextualize information, the prevalence of biases, such as episodic framing over thematic framing, can lead to distorted representations of social issues. Moreover, the role of journalists and media professionals in selecting and presenting information to publicly raised questions about transparency, objectivity, and accountability. As gatekeepers of information, they wield noteworthy influence over what stories are prioritized and how they are framed, underscoring the importance of ethical considerations in ensuring accuracy, fairness, and relevance in news coverage.

In framing theory, epistemological inquiries focus on how people come to know and understand the world through framed messages. Individuals interpret information through their frames of reference, which are influenced by factors such as culture, ideology, and individual experiences. However, the mass media plays a pivotal role in establishing interpretative frameworks that audiences utilize to understand and discuss public events (Scheufele, 1999). Through the strategic promotion of specific frames, political elites, media outlets, and other actors can influence public perception of an issue and potentially sway public opinion (Callaghan & Schnell, 2001).

Framing serves as a substitute for context in cultural analysis, functioning to "produce an event" by linking the present to the past and infusing subjects with the temporal density of history (Bal, 2002). Through framing, researchers could identify, enact, and manipulate frames, thereby shaping the interpretation and understanding of historical events. Kantawala (2020) underscores this notion, emphasizing that historians engage in framing, reframing, and unframing the past through interpretation, imagination, and objectivity, akin to the creative practice of crafting a narrative. Historians select and

highlight specific aspects of history, thereby guiding individuals' understanding of complex phenomena.

Theoretical Evaluation of Framing

So far, this paper has explored the various perspectives surrounding framing theory, highlighting its depth and complexity within the field of Communication research. However, there is more to be done. As we are likely to know, the purpose of a theory is to describe, explain, predict, control, understand, and reform. While some theories are designed or propounded to be able to do one of the purposes, some theories are capable of simultaneously performing a mixture of two, three or even more. Therefore, scholars have proposed standards or methods of theory assessment which can be disproved. These theory evaluation canons are testability, falsifiability, parsimony, explanatory power, heuristic value, predictive power, theoretical scope, cumulative nature of science, degree of formal development, aesthetics, openness, and appropriateness (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011; Shoemaker, et al., 2004; Wood, 2004). Recognizing the limitations of space, this analysis of this paper focuses on three specific criteria: *theoretical scope*, *parsimony*, and *heuristic value*. The primary criteria for my evaluation of these three methods are justified by their foundational importance in comprehensively assessing theories' efficacy and applicability. Examining framing theory through these lenses provides a more comprehensive understanding of its strengths and potential limitations.

To begin with, *theoretical scope* simply means, the more phenomena that a theory helps us understand, the better the theory. A scope can also be thought of as generality. A theory that is high in scope will apply to different situations (Shoemaker, et al., 2004). The earliest usage of frame analysis in Communication Studies began with examinations of media coverage of warlike political events. To start with, Entman (1991) contrasts U.S. media coverage of two tragic incidents where passenger planes were shot down by military forces: the Soviet

downing of Korean Air Lines Flight 007 in 1983 and the U.S. Navy's downing of Iran Air Flight 655 in 1988. According to the findings of the study, the KAL incident was framed in a moral discourse that attributed guilt and responsibility to the Soviet leadership, while the Iran Air incident was framed in a more technical, neutral manner that obscured U.S. responsibility. Also, the KAL incident received significantly more coverage in terms of time, prominence, and references to top officials compared to the Iran Air incident, suggesting the media portrayed the KAL incident as far more important.

In a similar research, Callaghan, and Schnell (2001) analyze the factors that influence media framing of the gun control debate in the United States and the findings show that frames dominated the media coverage, with over 47% of network news coverage using the "Guns and the Culture of Violence" frame. This suggests that the media played a more independent role in shaping the debate, rather than simply indexing their coverage to the range of opinion in government. Also, Glazier and Boydston (2012) discussed the alignment between media and presidential framing following 9/11 and the Iraq war, criticizing it as a failure of the press. The research was conducted by analyzing over 3,400 news stories and 500 presidential papers about 9/11 and the war, showing increasingly divergent framing behaviors over time.

In Nigeria, Obaje (2017) has examined how Nigerian newspapers framed their coverage of Boko Haram attacks. While the frame of "terrorism" was prominently reported, most stories were buried inside newspapers. The newspaper coverage focused on the impact of attacks, government responses, and security efforts, rather than delving into the reasons behind the attacks or the group's leadership. Elsewhere, framing theory has been extensively applied across various communication specializations. Notably, Paul D'Angelo, a prominent scholar in framing analysis, has primarily focused his research on the domain of journalism studies (D'Angelo, 2017; D'Angelo, 2019;

D'Angelo & Shaw, 2018). Hallahan (1999) and Kuan, et al, (2021) have analysed the application and implication of framing in public relations. Additionally, within the realm of health communication, scholars have delved into the utilization of framing techniques within health campaign messages (Afrin et al. 2020; Bullock & Shulman, 2021; Harrington & Kerr, 2017). Moreover, framing theory has found application in strategic marketing and advertising (Berger, et al., 1998; Grau, & Folse, 2007; Kuo, et al., 2022) among others. These instances underscore the widespread adoption and interdisciplinary relevance of framing theory across academic landscapes.

Another theory evaluation criterion in which framing theory is subjected to in this paper is *parsimony*. The term "parsimony" simply refers to simplicity. That is, *how simple is it to understand a theory?* A good theory provides a good description and explanation of an event, process, or behavior (Wood, 2004). To do so, we ask: how well does a theory answer the "what" questions? Shoemaker et al. (2004) equally emphasizes the principle of parsimony in theory evaluation. This principle suggests that when faced with competing theories that offer similar explanatory or predictive power, the simpler theory is favored. In other words, if two theories can achieve the same level of accuracy, the one with less complexity is preferable.

Stating the key assumptions of framing theory as discussed by various contributing authors is a better way to discuss the parsimony of this theory. The first assumption of framing is that journalists and media outlets select which topics to cover and how much prominence to give them (second-level agenda setting) (McCombs, et al., 1997a; 1997b). That is, the more a particular frame is used, the stronger it becomes (McQuail, 1994; Weaver, 2007). The media does not only present information, but they also frame it. They (journalists and media outlets) choose how to present the information, what details to emphasize (Entman, 2003) and what language to use (de Vreese, 2005).

Additionally, framing is a process, it emerges and evolves through repeated use by the media, public discourse, and cultural norms (Callaghan & Schnell, 2001; Entman, 2003; Scheufele, 1999). Also, people might accept the media's frame, or they might interpret the information through their existing frames of reference (Scheufele, 1999). However, Chong and Druckman (2007) made an important contribution by highlighting the dual nature of framing, which can be perceived both positively and negatively. While framing is mostly perceived as a strategic tactic for manipulation and deceit, it can also be viewed more neutrally as a process of learning and coordination around common beliefs, such as social norms which is similar to the gatekeeping function (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). This duality in perception adds depth to the theory without overly complicating its core principles. As Wood (2004) emphasized that unnecessarily cumbersome theories fail to meet the condition of parsimony, understanding framing theory is straightforward as it offers a concise explanation of “how media outlets select, present, and emphasize information to influence audience interpretation and understanding.”

After establishing the scope and parsimony of framing theory, it is equally important to assess the *heuristic value*. Heuristic relevance is the quality of inquiry that provokes curiosity in others, prompting them to act, conduct further investigations, or examine how the thought might play out in a different setting or group (Tracy 2019). Framing theory, while widely applicable across various forms of communication including interpersonal, intergroup, and mediated communication, may be considered low in heuristic value due to its limited ability to generate innovative ideas beyond the recognition that framing occurs in communication processes. While framing offers valuable insights into how information is presented and interpreted, its heuristic significance may be constrained by methodological limitations and inherent biases. Studies adopting framing techniques often rely heavily on media content analyses, which can be limited in terms of exploring the broader

implications and complexities of framing phenomena (de Vreese, 2005, 2012; Wu, 2023).

Moreover, the identification of framing typically requires the comparison of multiple sources reporting on the same news story, which can be methodologically challenging and prone to subjective interpretations (Entman, 1999). Additionally, the frame of the audience or the individual conducting the comparison may influence the analysis, potentially limiting the objectivity of the findings. As such, while framing theory provides valuable insights into communication processes, its heuristic value may be constrained by methodological challenges and a tendency to focus on the recognition of framing occurrences rather than generating novel theoretical insights. A theory is high in heuristic value when it helps us generate ideas for research and when it leads to other theoretical ideas. The newer hypotheses that can be generated from a theory, the better the theory (Shoemaker, et al., 2004).

Concluding Thoughts

In the pursuit of a comprehensive exploration and critical assessment of framing theory, this scholarly inquiry has necessitated a thorough examination of its genealogical background. This foundational exploration involved tracing the developmental trajectory of the theory, revealing its origins, theoretical underpinnings, and evolutionary pathways. Contextualizing the theory within its historical and intellectual setting established a robust scholarly foundation, shedding light on its conceptual definitions and theoretical lineage. This approach facilitated a robust appraisal of framing theory's applicability, relevance, and potential limitations within contemporary scholarly discourse, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of framing theory and its significance in shaping our understanding of media effects and public perception.

As exemplified in this paper, framing theory suggests that reality is often subjective and can be shaped by how information is presented, emphasizing certain aspects while downplaying others. Also, the way media gatekeepers organise and present the issues/events they cover, and how the audiences interpret what they are presented, are products of media framing. As such, the narrative applied in framing may limit the audience's ability to think critically and consider alternative perspectives, thus constraining their cognitive flexibility.

Interestingly, the framing theory also suggests that while reality is often distorted through how information is presented by selection and salience (downplaying others), the audience may either receive or accept the frames due to their prior knowledge and experience (audience frame). Audience frames, rooted in an individual's mental associations of words and ideas about a topic (Scheufele, 1999), are typically associated with news receivers rather than journalists or their sources.

However, the more recent studies have indicated a diminishing framing effect, attributing this phenomenon to the rise of social media platforms. The traditional mainstream media, long regarded as the powerhouse of public communication, has faced ongoing criticism throughout its history. With the widespread use of social networking and the ubiquity of smartphones, the landscape of social media has expanded exponentially (Güran & Özarslan, 2022). However, it is important to note that social media platforms, regardless of size, are not devoid of regulations; each operates under its ideological framework and employs preference algorithms to manage the vast influx of daily content. As users engage with news on these platforms, they exercise agenda-setting and reframing functions by elevating certain news stories and contents over others and selecting interpretations, thereby shaping public discourse (Aruguete & Calvo, 2018). Moreover, social media has provided a platform for news sources of questionable

authenticity, responsibility, and competency to gain traction, blurring the lines between reputable and unreliable sources and contributing to the dissemination of misinformation within the digital ecosystem (Chadwick, et al., 2018).

In conclusion, the rise of social media platforms like *X (formerly Twitter)* and *Facebook* has democratized the realm of political communication, empowering audiences with diverse platforms to engage with news from their perspectives and challenge traditional media frames (López-Rabadán, 2022). This shift has reduced the once-dominant influence of framing by traditional media outlets, as audiences now can create and share news content that aligns with their personal frames. Additionally, social media serves as a tool for fact-checking and debunking dominant frames, allowing audiences to critically assess information and participate more actively in shaping public discourse. As a result, audiences now have a wider choice of media sources and greater agency in determining the narratives that shape their understanding of everyday life.

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