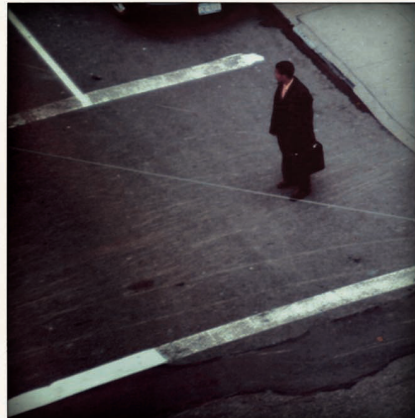# Critical Perspectives on the European Mediasphere

edited by
Ilija Tomanić Trivundža
Nico Carpentier
Hannu Nieminen

Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt
Richard Kilborn
Tobias Olsson
Ebba Sundin

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE EUROPEAN MEDIASPHERE

THE INTELLECTUAL WORK OF THE 2011 ECREA EUROPEAN MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION DOCTORAL SUMMER SCHOOL

Ljubljana, 2011

The added value of frames: On the differences with related concepts

Viorela Dan

The omnipresence of frames in academic literature over the past two decades has fuelled a discussion about the added value of the concept of the frame in comparison to seemingly analogue concepts. This chapter aims to shed light on this issue by reviewing the academic literature on the topic in order to contrast frames with some related concepts which have been used interchangeably, namely narratives, discourses and signs. The chapter starts by defining frames in the context of framing theory and then moves on to a comparison of these concepts. The comparison is structured in four dimensions: the level of the concept in the mass communication process, the role of the communicator, the scope of communication and the carrier of this communication.

1. A DEFINITION OF FRAMES

In recent decades, scholars from a wide array of disciplines have scrutinised meaning-making from a social constructivist perspective. In particular, the studies conducted by Bateson (1955) and Goffman (1974) in sociology and Bartlett (1932) in psychology have led to a tremendous number of studies of frames and framing within this paradigm. A search in the EBSCOhost database[1] shows that this proliferation of framing studies amounted to over 800 publications over the last two decades in communication studies alone.

Framing research, despite variations, is committed to the general idea that social actors and media makers select and highlight only a fraction of the available information for the audience (Entman, 1993). Entman (1993) authors one of the most widely accepted definitions in framing research:

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1   Communication & Mass Media Complete available at http://web.ebscohost.com

> To frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating context, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.* (p. 52, italics in original)

In line with the above definition, "to frame" or "framing" stands for this activity of selection and emphasis, while "frames" represent the output of the framing process. Accordingly, frames can be regarded as the chosen interpretations of issues which mark off other possible interpretations (e.g., Gitlin, 1980); they act like a support pillar of a certain view, holding its elements together just like a building-frame (Gamson, 2004).

Entman (1993) identified several "locations" for frames, including the communicator, the text, the receiver and the culture. Thus, frames are drawn from the underlying *culture*, then utilised or targeted by *communicators* in their *texts* and transmitted to the *receiver* where they may cause some effects. Consequently, framing research has the potential to analyse the entire mass communication process — an endeavour which has yet to be accomplished, since most studies only analyse single steps in the process. Nonetheless, there are several studies scrutinising two steps at once, like the diffusion of frames from social actors to media texts. These so-called input-output analyses (e.g. Dan and Ihlen, 2011a) remind a media-oriented academic community that ignoring the origins of media frames in social actors leads not only to the assumption that media frames emerge in a social/ political void, but also to an overestimation of journalistic autonomy. Despite their merits, such input-output studies do not focus on the effects of the observed frames on their recipients. Even so, there are other studies that do look at the *recipients* of frames, often (quantitatively) focusing on the effects particular frames have (e.g. Matthes, 2007).

What most communication studies seem to have underplayed is the role the culture plays in framing. This might lead to a misinterpretation of the identified constructs, especially when the authors do not belong to the culture within which the research material has been produced.

Research into *communicator frames*, i.e. the frames conveyed by social actors in their public relations materials, for example, is often conducted under the label of "strategic framing". This presumes that communicator frames might be produced out of a desire to "get messages across" and "win arguments" (Pan and Kosicki, 2001: 40). Yet, framing is not necessarily a deliberate process. Indeed, framing can be played out on an internal or subconscious level, with "no motive other than a conscientious effort

to frame events in a way that the sponsor considers most meaningful"
(Gamson, 1989: 158). In other words, framing is inescapable in daily life
(Goffman, 1974).

Studies of *media frames* have often looked for the elements described by
Entman in the above definition: problem definition, causal interpretation,
moral evaluation and treatment recommendation. These elements are of-
ten referred to as the informational content of frames, or "reasoning devic-
es". Scholars would ideally cluster- or factor-analyse the coded variables to
"extract" the frames in texts, as suggested by Matthes and Kohring (2008).
Yet, since Van Gorp (2007) laid out his case about the role of culture in the
framing process, framing research has found its way back to a wider un-
derstanding of frames that goes beyond this informational content and be-
yond the attempt to "extract" frames. Van Gorp reminded us that Gamson
and colleagues (e.g. Gamson and Lasch, 1983; Gamson and Modigliani,
1989) argued for a more complex understanding of frames. This complex
understanding regards frames not only as composed of informational con-
tent, but also of catchphrases, depictions, metaphors, exemplars or visual
images (Entman, 1993; Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Pan and Kosicki,
1993; Tankard, 2001). These lexical choices and visual images are often
called framing devices or condensational symbols (Gamson and Lasch,
1983). They are mechanisms which help one identify a certain frame, since
they can cue an entire known frame, i.e. one particular interpretation of
the received informational content (Gamson, 1989; Gamson and Lasch,
1983; Gamson and Modigliani, 1989). Since then, several framing studies
have been published, where the authors scrutinised their research mate-
rial for complex constructs, consisting not only of informational content,
but also of condensational symbols (e.g. Dan and Ihlen, 2011a; Zoch, Col-
lins, Sisco, and Supa, 2008). Yet, framing studies that include the analysis
of verbal and visual elements constitute a minority among framing stud-
ies (e.g., Dan and Ihlen, 2011b; Reynolds and Barnett, 2003).

2. Relation to signs

The concepts of frame and framing are related, in complex ways, to a set
of other concepts, the first of which is *signs/symbols*. My account — mostly
relying on Gamson and Lasch (1983) — suggests that signs and symbols
might be regarded as frame components. The central idea behind signs is
that meaning is socially constructed, not inherent in objects or events. One
central difference to frames becomes visible: while I am not aware of any
framing scholar arguing that objects are not stable containers of meaning

(they only claim this about events), post-Saussurean semiology states that: "A linguistic sign is not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept and a sound pattern" (Saussure, 1983: 66). Thus, even the meaning of objects is open to interpretation in semiology. Here, the link between concept and sound pattern, say between the idea of a dog and the understanding of the sound or written word "dog", is "conventional, and thus arbitrary, wholly lacking in any natural link with the object, completely free of and unregulated by it" (Saussure, 2006: 140). What these concepts have in common, though, is the fact that they assign an important role to the underlying culture. In semiology, the meaning a culture assigns to a particular articulation is a signified assigned to a signifier (Sd/Sr). Along these lines, a sign is a symbol when the underlying culture determines how it is to be associated with an object (see Peirce, 1965). Symbols are particularly important in visual media, where images, rather than words or sounds, are used as signifiers (Olson, 2008). Yet, lexical symbols exist. The word "blue", for example, stands not only for a colour, but also for an emotional state (see Olson, 2008).

Yet another difference between frames and signs or symbols relates to the role of the communicator and the intentionality of this communication. From a communicator perspective, frames can be used to persuade — an idea sustained mostly by research into strategic framing, Goffman's (1974) argument about the unavoidability of framing notwithstanding. In this case, framing appears to have more agency than signs and symbols. Accordingly, those who accept that framing can be used to persuade will find it plausible that signs and symbols can be used within strategic frames in a persuasive way. However, semiotic analysis is usually not judging communication in terms of their goals, but rather finds interest in whatever meanings a communication happens to produce (see Steinman, 2008).

3. RELATION TO NARRATIVE

A discussion about the role of culture in frames inevitably involves a discussion about narratives. As argued by Gamson (1989), "[t]he frames for a given story are frequently drawn from shared cultural narratives and myths" (p. 161) (see also Frayn, 1981; Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Price, Tewksbury, and Powers, 1997; Turner, 1982). Consequently, a narrative appears to be a fully developed, fully fleshed-out story, while a frame is the central organising idea at its core, which makes "sense of relevant events, suggesting what is at issue" (Gamson, 1989: 3). These narratives are carried by all sorts of communication forms, mostly verbal and visual.

One typical characteristic of narratives is the fact that they are sequentially organised, with a beginning, middle and an end (Ricouer, 1988). This temporal sequence does not appear that important in frames, though some authors speak about narrative frames, where the news account begins with an anecdote rather than a summary lead.

Walter Fisher (1984, 1985), the author of the theory of the narrative paradigm, contends that narration is the dominant mode of human communication: humans are storytellers ("homo narrans" - Fisher, 1987) who create and communicate stories that form understanding, guide collective reasoning and shape behaviour. Thus, narratives, just like frames, appear inescapable in everyday life. Yet, they can be used strategically. There is a motive behind a narrative, which influences the content of the narrative and the delivery. In fact, narrative was a popular type of persuasion and instruction from classical Greco-Roman times through the Middle Ages (Gring-Pemble, 2008). To cite Fisher (1970), "a communicator perceives a rhetorical situation in terms of a motive, and that an organic relationship exists between his perception and his response to that circumstance; his perception determines the characteristics of his discourse and his presentation" (p. 132).

4. Relation to discourse

Discourse encompasses verbal and non-verbal communication in social interaction (Cobley, 2008). Though most research on discourse focuses on language, there are also broader approaches where discourse is similar to ideology or representations. Discourses also entail the exercise of power in the sense that they delimit what can be said or thought in a certain social sphere (see Foucault, 1980).

In order to comprehend the relationship between discourse and frames, it is advisable to scrutinise previous studies of media coverage, where the authors discuss both media discourses and frames. These studies suggest that discourse can be seen as upper category. Thus, the news coverage of one particular issue in time represents the media discourse on that issue, which contains several frames and counter-frames. This interpretation is in line with the suggestions made by some prominent framing scholars, like Gamson in the foreword of "Framing Public Life" (Reese, Gandy, and Grant, 2001: x), or Pan and Kosicki (1993) in their "Framing Analysis: An Approach to News Discourse".

A case in point for these media studies is the research note by Eilders and Luter (2000) on the competing framing strategies regarding the Kosovo war in German public discourse. Another example is the study conducted by Boni (2002) on the frames producing the discourse on men's lives and bodies in the Italian edition of Men's Health. Yet another study, authored by Cooper and Pease (2009), looks at the media discourse after the 2006 cancellation of the film Brokeback Mountain in Utah because of its themes of gay love and homophobia. They found out that the discourse broke down into two entirely opposing frames — Defending Zion versus Disrupting Zion — but each argued for the necessity to safeguard different perspectives of morality.

This level-related clarification helps us understand the relationship between media frames and discourses. Yet, as described above, frames can be localised not only in media accounts, but also in the communicator, the culture and the recipients. I would argue that, while one can trace the frame back to its author (aka sponsor in framing research), no such thing is possible with discourses. Since discourses are more abstract than frames, they appear more distant from the communicators. Moreover, while the literature on strategic framing suggests that communicator frames might be designed to persuade, no such agency-driven persuasive goal can be found in discourses.

As for the other two "locations", it seems plausible that both frames and discourses can be localised in the culture and in the recipients. Here, just like when analysing media texts, discourse can be used like an upper category containing several frames (see Gamson and Lasch, 1983 for the role of condensational symbols within and the concept of "issue culture").

5. Conclusion

The above account illustrates the complexity of the concept of "frame" and its relationship with the concepts of discourse, narratives and signs. The differences presented in this chapter involve (1) the level of the concepts in mass communication, (2) the role of the communicator, (3) the scope of communication and (4) the carrier of this communication.

First, the literature review showed that the concepts at hand reside at different levels of the mass communication process. When it comes to a particular issue, the most far-reaching concept is the concept of discourse. A (media) discourse about poverty, for instance, might contain several

frames and counter-frames (e.g. welfare freeloaders vs. poverty trap), which are drawn from the respective narratives and counter-narratives in the underlying culture. These frames might also include signs, which — provided their meaning is readily apparent to most members of that particular culture — can act as symbols. A visual symbol of the "poverty trap" frame might be the picture of a single mother with numerous children.

This chapter has shown that frames are most similar to narratives. The main difference here relates to complexity. While narratives are fully developed stories, frames are central organising ideas within these stories. Thus, frames for a given story are often drawn from shared cultural narratives.

Secondly, the role of the communicator appears most important in narratives and frames. Since both narratives and frames can — but do not have to — be used in a persuasive way, the framer is "in" the frame (thus arguably in the sign), just like the narrator is "in" his or her narrative. On the other hand, the communicator is of no (or little) importance in discourse. Moreover, the intention of the communicator and the achievement of their goals (e.g., persuasion) only appear to be interesting for research focusing on the strategic use of frames. While signs might be used persuasively, the evaluation of their use is not something semiologists would typically be interested in.

Finally, the carrier of narratives, signs and frames can be either verbal or visual, while the carrier of discourse is not important (though the emphasis often lies on language). Current research on these concepts has a clear predisposition to verbal analysis. Yet, visuals are much more than "window dressing for or decorative distraction from the verbal component" (Grabe and Bucy, 2009: 77). While the number of visual framing studies has been constantly increasing (e.g., Buseck, 2008; Smith Dahmen, 2009), what the academic community lacks most is research considering not only verbal or visual elements, but rather verbal and visual elements.

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