

A photograph of a person's hands holding a smartphone up to take a picture of a small, patterned object on a table. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter. The person's arms and hands are visible, and a watch is on their left wrist. The background shows a table and some other objects, but they are out of focus.

Media Practice and Everyday Agency in Europe

edited by Leif Kramp, Nico Carpentier,
Andreas Hepp, Ilija Tomanić Trivundža,
Hannu Nieminen, Risto Kunelius,
Tobias Olsson, Ebba Sundin
and Richard Kilborn

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Media Effects as a Two-Sided Field: Comparing Theories and Research of Framing and Agenda Setting

Erik Knudsen

1. Introduction

Within media and communication studies there is a long tradition concerning media effects, emphasising how the media can exert effects on an audience. For instance, the theory of agenda setting assumes that the audience will regard an issue as more important when the issue is prominent and frequently covered in the news. However, media effect theories such as framing concentrate on examining how content is presented, not only the effects on an audience. Thus, the claim made in this chapter is that the field of media effects research is a two sided research field – a field that not only emphasises the effects on the audience, but also includes studies of the content itself. This claim is examined by comparing theories and research of framing and agenda setting – investigating different approaches and clarifying the differences and similarities between the two theories.

The chapter starts by placing agenda setting theory and framing theory within the history of media effects research and then giving an overview of different definitions of the two theories. After this, the two theories are compared – illustrating the claim that the study of media effects is a two-sided research field.

2. The history of media effects

McQuail (2010: 454) states that “the entire study of mass communication is based on the assumption that the media have significant effects (...)”. However, McQuail adds that there is great disagreement in the literature concerning the nature and extent of media effects.

Knudsen, E. (2014) ‘Media Effects as a Two-Sided Field: Comparing Theories and Research of Framing and Agenda Setting’, pp. 207-216 in L. Kramp/N. Carpentier/A. Hepp/I. Tomanić Trivundža/H. Nieminen/R. Kunelius/T. Olsson/E. Sundin/R. Kilborn (eds.) *Media Practice and Everyday Agency in Europe*. Bremen: edition lumière.

Building on the suggestion that there has been several paradigm shifts within the field of media effects research throughout the 20th century (McQuail, 2010), the latest suggested paradigm shift contains research viewing media as having a strong potential attitudinal effects, such as framing (Scheufele/Tewksbury, 2007). The paradigm shifts has evolved from the simple magic bullet and persuasion paradigm in the 1920s and 1930s, to the understanding of communication as a much more complicated process with the People's Choice study (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948) and the two step flow communication (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). The theory of cultivation (Gerbner and Gross, 1974) and the return of powerful mass media (Noelle-Neumann, 1973) marked a new paradigm, suggesting that the media exerted a significant attitudinal effect. During the same paradigm McCombs and Shaw (1972) launched the theory of agenda setting. This theory led up to the current paradigm, labelled "negation models" (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007).

3. A definition of agenda setting

When there is a relationship between intense media coverage of a certain issue and public attention towards the same issue, this is often referred to as a potential effect of the media's agenda setting function and the salience of an issue. If, for instance, one news topic is dwarfing all other news topics, it is also more likely that the general public will notice the issue that's reported (McCombs/Reynolds, 2009). Since McCombs and Shaw (1972) carried out their well-known Chapel Hill study of the agenda setting function, there has been a substantial amount of research within this research area (see: Bryant/Miron, 2004).

Thus, a key element in agenda setting studies is measures of how salient an issue is – both in the media coverage and in among the public's opinion. There is a diversity of different approaches of measuring salience of an issue. Early measures used Gallup Polls asking the question: "What is the most important issue facing the country today?" (McCombs, 2004, For an example see also: Iyengar/Simon, 1993). Another approach is pairing issues, obliging the respondent to rate the most important issue of the two (McCombs, 2004). To measure the agenda setting function of the media, these measurements of an issue's salience to the public is linked to a content analysis of the media coverage. However, Erbring et al. (1980) criticized this "mirror image" approach, arguing that it ignored the fact that issue concerns can arise from other sources than the media, for instance from personal experience and group perspectives and everyday surroundings. Consequently some improved measurement in-

volved tracing the salience issue by issue, using different five-point scales, measuring the importance of the issue, extent of discussion with friends, and need for government action (McCombs, 2004).

In addition, researchers has investigated frequency and presentation of certain news in terms of attributions such as a positive or negative tone and comparing amount of negative/positive press and negative/positive attitudes towards an issue (Sheafer, 2007, Carroll/McCombs, 2003, Miller et al., 2013). This is often labelled the second level of agenda setting. Thus, the first level consists of the media influencing what the public think about, and the second consists of the media influencing how people think about it (Ghanem, 1997).

4. Defining framing

The term framing has a number of different definitions, and suffers from a lack of consensus within the journalism and communication literature concerning what the term means and how it should be conceptualized. However, I would argue that there is one element on which there is a general agreement upon: that framing as a theory of media effect (at least) relates to how a message is presented, rather than what is presented.

Thus, one can understand the term framing at a macro level as how the news is presented (and how this would affect the content), and at a micro level how certain elements in a news narrative would affect the reader. This process can be further divided in media frames and audience frames¹ (Scheufele, 1999). As such, the theory builds on the assumption that how the media discuss, reflect upon, or choose a certain angle to tell a news story (media frames) can have an influence on how the public views important social issues (audience frames) – not which issues the public views as important (Scheufele/Tewksbury, 2007).

The term has roots in both sociology (Goffman, 1974) anthropology (Bateson, 1955) and psychology (Bartlett, 1932, Tversky/Kahneman, 1981) but became a buzz-word within media and communication studies after the publication of Entman's (1993) article "[f]raming as a fractured paradigm" (See: Vliegenthart/van Zoonen, 2011: 102). One of the most cited definitions of the term (See: Matthes, 2009) is Entman's (1993) definition, explaining that news framing primarily involve selection and salience – making information more highlighted and noticeable to an audience. Furthermore Entman defined framing as follows:

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: 52, italics removed).

However, a range of other definitions has been presented in the literature. For instance that “[f]rames are organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world” (Reese et al., 2001: 11) and that frames are the “central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events” (Gamson/Modigliani, 1987: 143).

4.1. Different understandings of framing

Entman (1993: 51) referred to framing as “a scattered conceptualization” and Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) claimed that there is an absence of consistency concerning how news frames are conceptualized and measured. Scheufele and Iyengar (forthcoming: 11) went even further – formulating that the framing literature has been divided into two schools of thought. The first school of thought, seeing framing as closely related to priming and agenda setting, and the second as a result of “variations in the mode of presentation for a given piece of information” – not different facts or aspects of an issue.

Iyengar (1991) divided news frames into two journalistic ways of presenting a story: the episodic news frame and the thematic news frame. The episodic frame can be understood as news that focuses on individuals and individual events, and discusses the public policy debate in terms of specific cases. For example, the media can describe unemployment by interviewing a laid off worker. The thematic news frame is more general. Here the media can describe unemployment by referring to official unemployment reports or changes in the welfare system (Iyengar, 2010: 279). Another example of understanding framing as news narratives is Capella and Jamieson’s (1996, 1997) examining of politics as ‘game’ or ‘strategy’. Framing can also be linked to linguistic approaches. For instance, the increased intention towards terrorists after 9/11 can also be presented as a “war on terror” (Reese, 2009), decrease in tax can be framed “tax relief” and paying tax can be framed as a “national service” (Lakoff, 2004).

4.2. Different approaches to doing framing analysis

There is a diversity of different approaches for doing framing analysis, with fundamental differences such as inductive and deductive reasoning. Matthes and Kohring (2008) explain that framing analysis has been conducted with a hermeneutic approach, a linguistic approach and a deductive approach. The hermeneutic approach has received critique because of the reliability and va-

lidity relied upon the transparency of how the frames were extracted. The linguistic approach received critique because it was difficult to make a standardized frame analysis of large text samples (Matthes/Kohring 2008).

The deductive approach theoretically derived frames from the literature and coded them in a standard quantitative content analysis. For instance Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) identified five common generic news frames: responsibility, conflict, human interest, economic consequences, and morality. This approach received critique because of its inflexibility when it comes to identifying new frames (Matthes/Kohring, 2008).

5. Comparing agenda setting and framing

Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) argues that that what sets framing theory apart from the agenda setting theory is that how, and not necessarily how much, an issue is covered can assert an effect. However, McCombs and Ghanem (2001) argue that the agenda setting theory is an umbrella theory for the framing theory. McCombs (1997: 37) argues that framing is the same as the second level of agenda setting, explaining that “framing is the selection of a restricted number of thematically related attributes for inclusion on the media agenda when a particular object is discussed” (McCombs, 1997).

Building on Scheufele and Iyengar’s (forthcoming) division of two schools of thought, the other understanding of framing is not linked to second level agenda setting, but rather the alterations of the presentation of the same message. This meaning of framing is arguably closely linked to the linguist Lakoff’s (2004) use of the term. For instance, a message can be presented with a loaded term instead of a neutral term, i.e. “tax relief” instead of “decreasing taxes”. The choice of presentation will affect the meaning of the message, but not the message. The opposite, as explained by Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007), would be a comparison of different social issues, such as financial risk and social consequences, because this is not referring to different modes of presentation of the same message, but comparing two different messages. Thus, Weaver (2007: 144) maintained that the difference between second level agenda setting and framing depends on how framing is defined.

Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that framing can work through agenda setting, because a particular frame (i.e. “tax relief” instead of “tax decrease”) can be put on the agenda. This can be illustrated by a Norwegian power line debate². The debate concerned the construction of high voltage masts in Hardanger – an area known for beautiful fjords and tourism attractions. The opposition to the construction of these power lines presented, or framed, the high voltage masts as the loaded term “monster masts”. The issue became the

fourth largest issue in the Norwegian press in 2010, and the term “monster masts” was seized upon by journalists and became a part of the journalistic terminology for describing the issue (Knudsen, 2011).

Within both schools of thought, a number of framing studies investigate both the framing of the content, and the effects on an audience. For instance, Huang (1996) combines a conceptualization and study of media frames, as well as survey data capturing audience frames. Iyengar (1991, 1987, 1989), Gamson (1992), Price (1997) and Lecheler and de Vreese (2013) also link a conceptualization of frames to effects on the audience.

The two schools of thought also seem to agree upon that studies of framing do not have to include studies of effects on an audience. For instance, Entman (1991) analysed news narratives and news frames of the downing of an Iranian airplane and a Korean airplane through content analysis. He conceptualized framing as describing “attributes of the news itself” (Entman, 1991: 7), and theoretically predicted a relationship between the media frames and the effects on the audience and political elites. The deductive approach by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) and the examining of horse race framing by Schuck et al. (2013), is another example of examining the media frames – not the audience frames. One could argue that a framing analysis of content, and not the effects on the audience, should not be regarded as studies of media effects. Nevertheless, Entman et al. (2009) argued that framing allows for studying the communication process as a whole, and distinguished between five different studies of frames: strategic frames, journalistic frames, news frames (or media frames) and framing effects. As such, Pan and Kosicki (1993: 55) summed up the value of only investigating the content as “an initial step toward analyzing the news discourse process as a whole”.

In comparison, the studies of agenda setting have primarily focused on the correlation between salience of news content, and public opinion surveys. An explanation for this could be that the very premise of agenda setting theory is that there is link between the media’s agenda and the public’s agenda.

6. Conclusion

This article has compared framing and agenda setting theory to investigate the claim that the theories regarding media effects are two-sided. The reasoning for this claim suggested that the first, the origins of effect studies, investigated effects on attitudes and behaviour, and that effect studies such as framing also include a study of the content itself – without studying the effect on audience.

I would argue that agenda setting is an example on the first, often linking content analysis of news coverage to surveys of public opinion. Framing, however, has several different approaches – and understandings – of what a fram-

ing is, and how to measure it. Some understands framing as a central part of agenda setting (McCombs/Ghanem, 2001), others as variations of presentation of the same message. Moreover, framing is understood as a central organising idea (Garrison/Modigliani, 1987), others as journalistic working routines (Gitlin, 1980: 7) and patterns of news coverage (Iyengar, 1991, Cappella/Jamieson, 1996, Cappella/Jamieson, 1997).

A number of studies investigate both the framing of the content, and the effects on an audience. There is, however, also several studies (i.e. Entman, 1993, Pan/Kosicki, 1993, Semetko/Valkenburg, 2000) investigating the framing in news content, without linking the news frames to the effects on the audience. A reasonable counter argument would be that studies that do not study effects on an audience should not be regarded as studies within the field of media effects. However, I would argue that analysis of speculative effects and studies of pure content should be included in the field of media effects research. The reasoning for this is that framing allows us to study the whole communication process – starting with elements affecting a journalist and journalistic priorities, to how journalists choose to present a news story, and how the content is presented, and finally how the news story is perceived by the audience. As such, investigating the content is one important step to understand the whole communication process. This supports the claim made in this chapter – that media effects research not only concerns the effects on the audience, but also include studies of the content itself.

Notes

- 1 There is also a debate in the literature regarding how framing works (i.e. see: Scheufele & Iyengar forthcoming). However, this chapter will not focus on how framing affects an audience.
- 2 See: http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/11/world/europe/11norway.html?_r=0.

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Biography

Erik Knudsen is a PhD Candidate at the Department of Information Science and Media Studies at the University of Bergen, Norway. Knudsen investigates how a Norwegian welfare reform is framed in the media coverage, and compares the media coverage with the public's opinion concerning the welfare reform.

Contact: Erik.Knudsen@infomedia.uib.no