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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Curmudgeonly Advice

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The command and control of public attention in nations with the size and complexity of the United States is accomplished—if it is accomplished at all—primarily through mass communication. Americans today are virtually bombarded with news and propaganda about public affairs. This bombardment influences how citizens make sense of politics (*framing*), how citizens decide what is important in politics (*agenda setting*), and how citizens evaluate the policies and authorities that politics places before them (*priming*)—or so at least it is claimed. My remarks here are confined to theorizing and research on framing, which, from where I sit, is most in need of advice.

The literature in brief

How might Americans go about making sense of what Lippmann (1925, p. 24) once called the "swarming confusion of problems" that constitutes public life? Lippmann understood that a good answer to this question should begin by recognizing that in modern society, ordinary citizens must rely on others for their news of national and world affairs. Such reports inevitably privilege and promote particular points of view. Reporters and editors, but also presidents, members of Congress, corporate publicists, activists, and policy analysts are all engaged in a more or less continuous conversation over the meaning of current events.

In one vocabulary, this conversation is said to take place through an exchange of "frames" (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992). Frames, it is said, "make the world beyond direct experience look natural" (Gitlin, 1980, p. 6); they "bring order to events by making them something that can be told about; they have power because they make the world make sense" (Manoff, 1986, p. 228); they supply "a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them" (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, p. 143). Frames include both the rhetorical tools fashioned by political elites to advance their ideas and the often-unarticulated rules of selection, emphasis, and presentation that govern the work of journalism.

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The issues taken up by government and the events that animate political life are always subject to alternative interpretation; they can always be read in more than one way. If, as Popkin (1993) argues, framing arises "whenever there is more than one way to think about a subject" (p. 83), then politics is an altogether splendid subject for framing. Frames (or something very much like frames) should be ubiquitous in political communication.[1]

Frames suggest how politics should be thought about, thereby encouraging citizens to understand events and issues in particular ways. By defining what the essential issue is and suggesting how to think about it, frames imply what, if anything, should be done. Elites spend as much time and money as they do crafting and disseminating frames on the assumption that frames make a difference—that good frames will attract and hold an audience's attention. Is this assumption correct?

So it seems. One empirical test for framing arises out of long-standing concerns about the capacity of ordinary people to govern themselves. Many perceptive analysts of politics have questioned whether citizens really know what they want and need and whether opinions on matters of public policy are actually, in one powerful formulation, "nonattitudes" (Converse, 1970). Nonattitudes are usually taken as a sign of the average citizens' indifference to politics, but they may also point to the absence of a serious debate among elites. Put the other way around, when elites provide useful frames, citizens may be more likely to see a connection between what they care about and what politics offers and so may be more likely to develop real opinions. Insofar as elites provide useful frames, citizens should be more likely to develop real opinions. And, in fact, they seem to: In a series of question-wording experiments embedded in national surveys across a variety of issues, when provided helpful frames, citizens are more likely to express an opinion. Moreover, in the presence of helpful frames, opinions are more stable over time and better anchored in the material interests and political commitments that the frames appear to highlight (e.g., Kinder & Nelson, 2005; Sniderman & Theriault, 2004).

Other experiments compare one frame against another. Because alternative frames highlight different features of an issue, they should alter the relative weight given to the material interests, group sentiments, and political principles that potentially go into making up an opinion—and so they do (e.g., Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Jacoby, 2000; Kinder & Sanders, 1990, 1996; Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997; Nelson & Kinder, 1996; Price, 1989). In this respect, frames are like recipes, advice from experts on how citizens should cook up their opinions (Kinder & Sanders, 1996).[2]

I do not mean to imply that citizens simply and automatically follow the recipes broadcast by elites. For one thing, many will miss the broadcast and never receive the advice. For another, frames are constructed with the tastes of the audience very much in mind. Framing, like agenda setting and priming, is constrained by the anticipated reaction of the audience—or, to use a different language, by what the American political culture finds permissible. If frames wander too far afield, they will be rejected. Frame effects require credible sources (Druckman, 2001), and they do

not necessarily stand up to hostile questioning (Druckman, 2004; Druckman & Nelson, 2003). Frames are not all-powerful, then, but they seem powerful enough to engage our attention. Next, I offer three recommendations, which in the unlikely event that they be taken seriously, would deepen our understanding of framing.

Advice

Enough already with the experiments

Virtually all the framing results I have cited so far come from experiments. This is not all bad; in fact, much of it is good. Experiments have real advantages. As Thomas Palfrey and I once wrote:

> Compared to other social-science methods, experimentation provides a clearer glimpse of cause-and-effect relations, enables complex phenomena to be decomposed, accelerates interdisciplinary conversations …, is more likely to produce anomalous facts that must be taken seriously, and travels more flexibly across different levels of aggregation. (Kinder & Palfrey, 1993, p. 11)

It would be strange and perhaps even unseemly for me to argue against experimentation in general.

Moreover, framing experiments in particular have some very desirable features. For one, most deliberately mimic actual elite debates and everyday journalistic conventions. For another, many are inserted into representative sample surveys, and so the common complaint about experiments—that they exploit convenient but unrepresentative populations (Anderson, Lindsay, & Bushman, 1999; Sears, 1986)—simply does not apply.

Nevertheless, experimental results can always be questioned on their generalizability, and framing effects are no exception. The major worry in this respect is that framing experiments—like experiments in mass communication generally—typically obliterate the distinction between the supply of information, on the one hand, and its consumption, on the other. That is, experiments are normally carried out in such a way that virtually everyone receives the message. The typical experiment thereby avoids a major obstacle standing in the way of communication effects, namely, an inattentive audience, lost in the affairs of private life. By ensuring that frames reach their intended audiences, experiments may exaggerate their power. A more balanced reading of frame effects requires methodological diversification, experiments *and* studies oriented to the world outside.

One might expect to find such demonstrations in the literature on social movements. To explain the emergence and occasional successes of social movements, researchers (by now a bit of a movement themselves) point to various contributing conditions: precipitating grievances, material resources, political constraints and opportunities, preexisting organizational structures, and, increasingly in recent years, compelling frames (e.g., Gamson, 1992; McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996; Snow & Benford, 1992). The basic claim here is that collective action draws "on the

trust and cooperation that are generated among participants by shared understandings; or, to use a broader category, on the collective action frames that justify, dignify, and animate collective action" (Tarrow, 1994, p. 22). But while it appears to be the case that movement leaders spend a fair amount of time formulating frames and strategizing about their dissemination (e.g., Branch, 1988; Freedman, 1999; Garrow, 1978; Gerhards & Rucht, 1992), this is not the same as demonstrating that frames actually do the work they are assumed to do, and empirical studies in natural settings with this object in mind are in short supply (McAdam, 1996).

Or, one might expect to see opportunistic exploitations of natural experiments, of the sort that dot the literatures on agenda setting and priming and that provide reassurance that communication effects are not confined to experimental settings (e.g., Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Krosnick & Brannon, 1993; Krosnick & Kinder, 1990; Pollock, 1994; Stoker, 1993). In the case of framing, an exploitable natural experiment requires a decisive shift in the deployment of frames in some real-world setting taking place in such a way that the putative effects on public opinion—if such effects there be—are fortuitously captured. Such serendipitous opportunities do not come along often, but it is nevertheless unnerving (to me at least) that we still are waiting for compelling demonstrations of framing effects in natural settings.

Real frames

What is a frame again? Not every analyst who makes use of the idea of frame means just the same thing by it (Entman, 1993). Indeed, the conceptual diversity on display in this area of scholarship is impressive, if "impressive" is the right word. But my concern here is less with conceptual imprecision than with operational thinness. The empirical literature on framing, especially the experimental literature, typically operationalizes frame in an emaciated way. Alternative frames are represented by a single presentation of a sentence or two, reminders of how an issue might be understood. So, for example, in a framing experiment on affirmative action, participants in a national survey were assigned to one of two conditions (Kinder & Sanders, 1990). Those assigned to the first were asked a question on affirmative action that offered, as justification for opposing affirmative action, the assertion that such policies discriminate against Whites (the "reverse discrimination" frame); those assigned to the second were asked the same question, but this time the question contained, as justification for opposing affirmative action, the assertion that such policies give Blacks advantages they have not earned (the "undeserved advantage" frame).

This is fine as far as it goes. But such experiments do not speak very convincingly to the presentation of frames in everyday life. Such presentations are characterized by repeated exposure through multiple venues over long periods of time—a whole curriculum of exposure. Furthermore, frames are more than mere justification. Gamson's original formulation provides a good reminder of this point. According to Gamson, "Every package has a signature—a set of elements that suggest its core frame and position in shorthand fashion" (Gamson & Lasch, 1983, p. 399), and these elements include metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, visual images, rhetorical

flourishes, and justifications through appeals to principle. In politics, frames are instruments of emotional arousal as well as edification. From this point of view, research on framing has so far explored just a small patch of the whole territory.

Core effects

Although the literature makes a good case that frames can affect how (and even whether) people evaluate various matters of politics, it actually skips over the focal concern I began with, namely, how people make sense of these matters in the first place. In all the studies of frames and framing, understanding itself is almost never directly addressed or measured. This is unfortunate, because cognitive psychology has recently been generating theories of comprehension that seem to travel nicely to the domain of politics.

An excellent example arises from the research of Pennington and Hastie (1988, 1992, 1993) on jury decision making. Pennington and Hastie supply both a theory of individual reasoning and a theory of collective choice, though it is the former that concerns us here. And for the individual juror, the trial presents a serious challenge to understanding: an avalanche of facts and claims, coming in no particular order or chronological sequence, full of puzzling gaps. In this way, the complications of the trial are perhaps not so different from what a person finds when he or she opens the morning newspaper.

Pennington and Hastie (1992) argue that jurors try to make sense of the trial by organizing the evidence into a coherent mental representation, a plausible story: "Meaning is assigned to trial evidence through the incorporation of that evidence into one or more plausible accounts or stories describing 'what happened' during events testified to at the trial" (p. 243). In constructing their stories, jurors draw on evidence from the case itself, knowledge they may possess about similar stories, and generic expectations about what makes a story complete. These generic expectations derive from knowledge that is abstract and general; it has to do with the common structure of most human purposive action sequences. People know what makes a good story, and this knowledge influences how they understand text and how they represent such text in their minds. For jurors, a good story organizes and orders the jumble of facts and claims. Evidence is unscrambled. Causal and intentional relations are established. Gaps are filled. Plot turns are identified. And finally, a good story instructs the juror as to which verdict to choose—just as, perhaps, a good frame instructs citizens as to which policy to support.[3]

End

Taken all around, we now seem quite a ways further along toward the "science of communication" that Klapper (1960), Hovland (1954), and other founders of the field originally hoped for. Of course, there is still quite a bit left to do, and on framing in particular, I have offered three recommendations: that the recent and productive

investment in experimental research be balanced off with more studies of framing au naturel; that the visual, rhetorical, and affective aspects of frames be taken seriously; and that the impressive theoretical advances of the cognitive revolution in psychology be exploited.

Notes

1 It might be said that in pure form, frames supply no new information. Rather, by offering a particular perspective, frames *organize*—or better *reorganize*—information that citizens already have in mind. In this regard, framing effects in political communication resemble the celebrated experimental demonstrations of Tversky and Kahneman (1981) of the difference that alternative frames make to decision making.
2 Shifting the underlying foundations of opinion is one thing, changing opinion is another. In order to change opinion, a frame must not only be compelling (i.e., fit its subject well), though it must be that, and it must not only induce large numbers of people to think about the subject in a new way, though it must do that as well. To change opinion, a frame must also induce large numbers of people to think about the subject in a way that pushes them in a new direction (see, e.g., Chong 1996; Nelson et al., 1997).
3 Other promising examples include the account of reasoning by analogy of Holyoak and Thagard (1995) and the theorizing and research of Kintsch (1998) on how people understand text. For one attempt to integrate cognitive models into studies of framing, see Berinsky and Kinder (2006).

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