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Framing Research -- Why Theory and Methodology Matter More Than Ever

By Dietram A. Scheufele, Division Head

I had a conversation with one of our colleagues recently about tenure reviews in our field, and he was concerned that it was becoming more and more difficult for communication scholars to meaningfully evaluate each other. The reason, he argued, is an increasingly diverse field of communication with scholars in many multiple sub-disciplines who often subscribe to very different epistemological and methodological approaches.

While I agree with my colleague's description, I disagree with his conclusions. I agree that the proliferation of more and more specialized sub-disciplines with their own very narrowly-focused journals can be detrimental to the overall growth of our discipline and to the quality of our work. I disagree, however, that this growth of our discipline makes it more difficult to establish objective criteria for evaluating the quality of academic work or live up to standards, such as intersubjectivity or replicability.

A good example is an area of research that I am personally very interested in – framing. At our Toronto convention, there were probably more papers presented that made some reference to framing theory in the title or abstract than ever before. And this was true across all divisions and interest groups of AEJMC. Scholars from various sub-disciplines examined framing as a journalistic tool for creating shared meaning, as a broad theory of media effects, as a way of defining content differences between different health messages, and as a hegemonic tool of social control, to just name a few.

This broadening of concepts, of course, can be a good thing. Communication as a discipline needs to emphasize its relevance to other disciplines and make unique theoretical contributions to fields, such as sociology, political science, and psychology. But the inflationary use of labels, such as framing, probably does more harm than good. In fact, it tends to dilute the definitional boundaries of the construct. This, of course, emphasizes the importance of communication theory and methodology for our field. How do we define framing? And, consequently, how do we measure framing?

The first question is not an easy one. But it is nonetheless one that we need to tackle as a discipline. Among the many papers on framing that were presented at recent conferences, some examined the way (cont. pg 2)

different media outlets framed news stories for audiences; some examined frame building and frame alignment in a Gamsonian tradition as a tool for influencing public discourse; and some examined differences in media framing across cultures. This unit of analysis problem is not new, but it is especially important here. We are using the term "framing" synonymously for different phenomena at different units of analysis. And this has nothing to do with specialized sub-disciplines or the growth of our field. This has something to do with a lack of careful concept explication and a lack of attention to units of analysis.

This unit of analysis problem is especially important for the area of framing because it has direct implications for how we conceptualize the process of framing. So how *does* framing work? Why do journalists cover issues the way they do? What are the interpretive frames that they fit media content into in order to make interpretation easier for audiences? Price and Tewksbury provided at least some answers to this question as early as 1997. They argued that frames are applicability effects. In other words, a certain way of describing an issue only has an effect if this description falls on fertile ground with audience members, i.e., if journalists are successful in evoking a schema that audiences share with them.

This means, however, that frames are likely culturally specific. At least a dozen people in this country – when I first met them – told me that I reminded them of the "German guy" from The Sound of Music. For everyone around, this is usually very amusing. Unfortunately, I have never seen the movie and therefore do not have the cognitive schema necessary to make sense of the comparison (or frame). This culturally-specific applicability of frames also means that we need research at different levels of analysis. Wolfgang Donsbach's research from the 1980s on cross-cultural comparisons of journalistic norms and standards may be a good starting point. We need similar cross-cultural studies examining how frames are being used by journalists and understood by audiences. At this point, our discipline is searching for variations within cultures where we should be looking for variations between cultures.

The second question raised earlier refers to how we measure frames. Previous studies have examined urgency frames, threat frames, international aid frames, episodic frames, horserace frames, and individual survival frames, to name just a few. And only some of these labels represent frames as defined earlier. Others merely describe different types of content. Based on some of Kahneman & Tversky's seminal work on Prospect Theory, framing means describing the same content in different ways, using terminological or visual tools. In other words, only the mode of presentation differs the message content stays the same. Many of the frame manipulations used in recent research in our field, however, are simple content manipulations that have very little to do with framing.

At this point, our discipline is therefore running the risk of getting caught up in a sexy label and forgetting what the concept is all about. And in the long run we may be destroying perfectly useful and very important constructs, such as framing agenda-setting, by watering them down and subsuming everything under a singular label.

Framing is an important but very specific type of media effect. And it should be explicated as such, both theoretically and methodologically.□

Get to know…Susan Chang, 2004 Barrows Scholarship Winner, Michigan State University

It is truly an honor to be the 2004 recipient of the Barrow Minority Award. The past summer consisted of a whirlwind of events for me, which culminated at the AEJMC conference. Just a few weeks prior to traveling to Toronto, I had finished up grades for the first summer session, taken (and passed!) my comprehensive exam, and began the process of planning my dissertation and searching for potential academic employers. Now that I am back at Michigan State University, I am immersed with my current research (a.k.a. "the" dissertation).

My addiction to television programs and films (I would be able to sleep much more if I watched much less), fascination with new marketing practices, and audience reactions to the media led me to a dissertation topic interested in the practice of product and brand placement in entertainment media. More broadly, I am exploring Brehm's Psychological Reactance theory by understanding how source variables might generate indirect effects upon audiences. In application to product placement, this research seeks to understand how types of products (i.e., ethically charged products such as tobacco, guns, or alcohol versus non-ethically charged products such as candy, bottled water, or automobiles) and the sources (i.e., non-profit versus for-profit) of those products might affect audience attitudes.

Looking ahead, my research goal is to have a comprehensive understanding of how media content is developed, and how that content influences audience cognition and behavior. As brand placements become a global phenomenon, I hope to contribute to the existing product and brand placement literature and extend theories or approaches that can be explored in conjunction with brand placements.

Like all of my endeavors, I am inspired and motivated by environments that allow me to grow in both my professional skills and as a person. Prior to returning to the graduate school environment, I conquered New York City as an Advertising Sales Marketing Manager at CNBC. As a marketing practitioner, I learned a great deal about the industry, some tricks of the trade, and built skills (both professional and personal) that I would not have had the opportunity to experience elsewhere. The time that I spent in an office allowed for me to learn about what it truly means to pay my dues, to know when to express my opinions and (more often times than not) when to remain humble, to patiently train those in entry level positions, and read carefully between the lines in a corporate environment.

These skills have often translated well in my academic career – both my research interests and teaching responsibilities. Because of my time in New York City, it was not surprising that my research interests regarding marketing practices grew and that I was assigned to teach Advertising courses. My background has provided me with a roster of good friends who have been kind enough to allow me the opportunity to tap into their resources so that I am kept up to date with the industry. They have also been generous in donating their time to be guest speakers in my classes to share their professional experiences with the students. The marketing materials created while at CNBC have served as examples of marketing materials to illustrate concepts for Principles of Advertising, Integrated Strategy, and Account Planning courses.

It's a little cheesy, I know, but I would like to take this opportunity to offer a heartfelt "thank you" to Dr. Charles Salmon and Dr. William Donohue for their letters of recommendation in conjunction with this award. I am certain that without their continued support, good advice, and guidance, I would not have had this honor. In addition, I would like to give a shout out to my Mommy and Daddy in California for the sacrifices they made for my sister and me, their hard-work, dedication, and lifelong attempt to make me a "good kid." □

Get to know…Andrew Hayes, 2004 Top Paper Winner, The Ohio State University

I am a bit of an "outsider" coming into the field of communication, as most of my formal training was completed in Psychology. My primary area of research is computationally-intensive methods of data analysis—new methods of analysis made possible with the advent of high-speed, lost-cost computers. Most methods of data analysis used by social scientists are based on old methodologies and assumptions that were convenient before the computing power of today existed but that have become somewhat less relevant in the 21st century. For example, the sampling distribution of a statistic is both a theoretical and a mathematical construct. The use of sampling distributions for evaluating research findings carries with it assumptions that must be roughly met in ones data because those assumptions are built in to the mathematics that make sampling distributions work as benchmarks for assessing what can happen in a study "by chance." Modern methods of data analysis are based on fewer mathematical assumptions because they rely on empirical (rather than theoretical) generation of possible research outcomes under a model of chance. These new "resampling" methodologies include randomization tests and bootstrapping, and combinations thereof. Although statistics researchers such as myself are excited about the potential of these modern methods of data analysis, their adoption is likely to be met with continued resistance, because (1) a sufficient case needs to be made they are better than the tools which social scientists are already familiar, either philosophically or statistically, (2) they are usually construed as "alternative" methodologies only to be used in certain constrained circumstances and (3) nobody else uses them. My past and current research focuses on making that case, when possible, and exposing researchers to these methods (through teaching, books, and journal articles). An additional area of interest in statistics is inference under heteroscedasticity. Most of the inferential statistical methods used by communication researchers assume equality of variance between groups, or equality of conditional errors in linear models, for example. There is plenty of evidence that these staples of communication research can perform badly in the presence of heteroscedasticity. There are alternatives available, such as the use of heteroscedasticity-consistent standard error estimators, that can give researchers comfort that the validity of their inferences are not compromised by heteroscedasticity. I also believe heteroscedasticity is too often construed as a statistical nuisance rather than a signal that a linear models focused on estimating conditional means is an oversimplification. By treating error variance entirely as "noise" means that we miss some interesting phenomena and the potential to advance theory and research.

In communication and public opinion, my primary area of research is self-censorship. Motivated by theories in communication that describe the social conditions that lead people to express opinions openly or hide them from public view (by, for example, failing to speak up when a person believes others will disagree), I've been investigating "willingness to self-censor" as an individual difference. The tenet of this research is that there are wide individual differences in people's willingness to openly express opinions when the costs of doing so are high, and these individual differences are both interesting in their own right and serve a moderating function in the relationship between social situations or conditions and opinion expression. The first phase of this research program has been focused on the development of a method of measuring this individual difference and making the case that the instrument is psychometrically sound. The research is currently in press or working its way through the peer-review system. The second phase of this research focuses on illustrating the application of this construct to public opinion research. For example, I show in research currently being written up for publication that concerns about the social ramifications of public political opinion expression (such as attending political rallies, signing petitions, writing letters to elected officials or the media) may lead people to not participate. In this research, people who scored especially high on my measure of willingness to self-censor in hostile opinion climates were less likely to have recently engaged in various public political activities, even after controlling for demographics, political interest and efficacy, media use, and other personality variables. I also intend to examine microcultural variations in willingness to self-censor and the relationship between such variations and willingness to disclose opinions about controversial topics to a pollster. People who reside in certain regions of the country, or even certain locations within a city, may through differences in socialization develop personalities that are less comfortable with the act of publicly presenting dissenting opinions in a social context, such as during a social interaction with a pollster. Such people may simply opt out of participating in a poll. Or if they participate, they may be more likely to avoid answering certain questions by refusing to respond, answering

"I don't know," or reducing the extremity of their expressed opinion (by selecting a "middle or the road" type of response) Such a phenomenon, if it exists, would lead to an underrepresentation of minority viewpoints in public opinion data.

Get to know…Julie Andsager, 2004 Top Paper Winner, University of Iowa

Not only do about 1,400 college students die annually from alcohol consumption or the consequences, but the vast majority of sexual assaults and physical assaults (and much academic failure) can be attributed to alcohol.

In this experiment, we sought to determine whether exemplars in a persuasive, anti-alcohol message might be useful in reducing college students' alcohol consumption. Considering what we know about identification from social cognitive theory, it seems intuitive that an attractive, credible exemplar should increase the likelihood of success of such a message.

For the last decade or so, though, many universities have been using social norms messages in an attempt to alleviate heavy drinking and its consequences. Social norms messages typically present a statistic, such as the average number of drinks students consume when they party or the number of students who binge drink (a term on its way out) at the university. Results from these campaigns are mixed at best, and most research indicates that they are ineffectual. (See the excellent review in Campo et al., 2003 – reference below.)

We embedded an exemplar's direct quotes about drinking and social orientation in a short magazine article about tanning and skin cancer to reduce the obtrusiveness of the drinking variable. The direct quotes were produced by UI seniors who wouldn't be participating in the experiment. The exemplar was Chris, 20, a marketing student. Chris's gender was never identified so as not to confound similarity.

The experimental manipulations consisted of drinking or not, and being socially oriented or not. Thus, in one treatment, Chris talks about "my friends and I" enjoying beer at the lake; in another, they enjoy the lake but don't mention beer; or Chris talks about going to the lake alone. Of course, that means that Chris is also drinking alone at the lake in the last condition.

It turns out that our student subjects found the message to be most effective (i.e., credible, useful, important) when Chris was partying with friends. The least effective message was Chris alone *without* beer. Student gender and alcohol consumption were also important in estimations of message effectiveness, with females and heavy drinkers finding the message more effective overall.

Students indicated that Chris was most similar to them when he/she was social, regardless of whether the beer was included. Perceived similarity was the strongest predictor of message effectiveness.

The question our study raises, obviously, is how to create an alcohol-reduction message when the most effective exemplar is the one who parties, without tapping into fear appeals? Find the answer and strike it rich.

The University of Iowa student authors on this paper are Victoria Bemker, MA student; Hong-Lim Choi and Vitalis Torwel, doctoral students.

Reference

Campo, S., Brossard, D., Frazer, M. S., Marchell, T., Lewis, D., & Talbot, J. (2003). Are social norms campaigns really magic bullets? Assessing the effects of students' misperceptions on drinking behavior. *Health Communication, 15*, 481-497.

What is PF&R, and what do we do about it?

by Doug Blanks Hindman, PF&R Chair

Professional Freedom and Responsibility is one of three standing committees of AEJMC that reviews our division's conference programming as well as panels we sponsor at other conferences such as the midwinter meetings, MAPOR, and ICA. The other two standing committees are Research and Teaching.

In the past, the three standing committees reviewed each division's yearly reports and pointed out strengths and weaknesses. These annual laurels and darts became the source of much consternation among the divisions. As the standing committees saw the division's reactions to the annual reviews deteriorate from concern to despair to derision and indifference, change became imminent.

We now have kinder, gentler standing committees that have sworn off the punitive model of annual division reviews. What that means to us is our division's PF&R activities will now be evaluated every five years rather than annually. It also means that we do not have to address each of the components of PF&R each year. This is good news to our division, which prides itself in the quality and quantity of its research panels, but that also takes PF&R and teaching seriously.

So, just what is PF&R, and more importantly, what do we do about it?

The standing committee defines PF&R broadly as "concern with working environment and standards of the professions that are the focus of our teaching." In case of CT&M, the professions include research and polling firms as well as traditional mass media organizations.

PF&R activities are to focus on professional communicators – their freedom to express themselves, their ethical concerns, and their accountability. But divisions are also evaluated on their *own* professional responsibilities – to be inclusive of women and minorities, and to provide public service. Hence, we are to strike a balance between industry criticism and self criticism.

Industry criticism is easy. The question I'd like to raise is what might the CT&M Division explore in the spirit of self criticism and accountability?

For example: An issue that communication departments are grappling with is whether or not to require undergraduates to participate as subjects in one or more research projects in order to receive credit in introductory level classes. This research pool requirement is common in psychology departments, and is becoming increasingly common in communication departments.

Departments that have adopted the research pool requirement had to address challenges raised by colleagues opposed to the policy. Opposition, both principled and pragmatic, might include the following questions: Does the policy exploit students? Does it violate IRB guidelines for informed consent? Do students really learn anything about research by participation? Does the policy favor experimental research over other types of communication research, and if so, what does it say about the value of that type of research to our students? Does the department have a responsibility to provide one type of researcher with subjects, and not others?

A panel discussion could help articulate the ethical and practical issues surrounding this question. The panel could include opponents and proponents of the policy as well as those who have succeeded and those who have failed to enact research pool policy. Regardless, the panel would help sharpen the debate and clarify the PF&R issues involved.

Our challenge as a division is to take the lead in explicating the PF&R issues regarding communication research. We must be willing to articulate our ethical principles. We must respond to criticisms of our way of doing research. We must encourage the free expression of our colleagues and students, even when that means that our research takes longer to conduct. We must be inclusive of women and minorities, and we must serve the greater good. The Standing Committee on Professional Freedom and Responsibility wants us to do all of things. Fortunately, we have five years to do it.

Please contact me if you have ideas for panels that address PF&R issues. We are particularly interested in co-sponsoring panels at off-site locations such as ICA, BEA, or the AEJMC Mid-Winter meetings.

Cornell University

Department of Communication

College of Agriculture and Life Sciences

Two (2) Assistant Professors, Communication

Starting Date: Fall Semester, 2005

Description: The Department of Communication at Cornell University is seeking two (2) social science scholars to conduct research and to teach in one or more of the following areas: communication theory, research methods, persuasion, and/or communication technology. The successful candidates will have a Ph.D. in Communication or closely aligned field and have (or show promise of developing) a national/international reputation doing theory-based empirical research that will contribute to the Department's core strengths in science and environmental communication, mass media and social issues, and communication and technology; scholars whose work crosses two or more of these areas are especially sought. The successful candidates must be able to develop a research program connected to college and university priorities in information science, applied social science, life science issues, environmental issues, and/or public outreach, and should have a high potential for attracting external research funding. Communication faculty teach two to three graduate and/or undergraduate courses per academic year, and advise students in the Department's B.S., M.S., and Ph.D. programs.

Salary: Cornell offers a highly competitive salary and benefits package. Support for start-up research costs will be available. Women and minorities are especially encouraged to apply.

Application: Send letter of application addressing position qualifications and goals, vita, official academic transcripts, names and contact information of three references. Please request that each reference submit a letter of recommendation. All materials should be sent to Erin Hanlon, Search Committee Coordinator, Department of Communication, 337 Kennedy Hall, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853-4203. For additional information, email Dr. Michael Shapiro (mas29@cornell.edu) or telephone 607-255-6356. For more information about the Department of Communication, please visit our website at www.comm.cornell.edu.

Closing Date: Applications will be reviewed beginning October 18, 2004, until candidates are selected.

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