



Conceptual Foundation of Framing, Media Framing, and Rhetorical Scholarship

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Abstract

This article seeks to situate the concepts of framing in the rhetorical act of communication domain. The article's objective is to expand the application of framing analysis in the context of rhetorical criticism and perspectives. It argues that given the contemporary multimodal mode of communication, there is a necessity to expand the horizon of the understanding of rhetoric and rhetorical criticism. Methodologically, the article is designed on qualitative research patterns to understand an in-depth relationship between frames and rhetoric. Anchored to this theme and method, the article is structured on a three-fold pattern: first, it spells out the fundamentals of what counts as frame, showing its disciplinary orientation; second, it delineates its philosophical lineage, and third, it sketches out how the concept of framing can be profitably used to grasp the impact of rhetoric in the complex system of multidimensional human communication. In the ever-expanding and unprecedented burgeoning of communication system, it has become increasingly necessary to adopt a new lens to account for the diversities of rhetorical situations as the ancient or classical methods/approach has become too narrow and failed to capture diverse gateway of rhetorical communication.

Keywords: *Communication, frame, media framing, rhetoric, and schemata*

Introduction

Rhetoric should be understood against this new technological and academic scenario to understand the ties between new forms of information dissemination and the impact that it has on the audience. The contemporary world is steeped in a multi-model communication structure. Mode and channel of communication have become extremely diversified. As new forms of communicating a message emerge, a meaning-making process also takes on a parallel growth, with numerous perspectives and criticisms vying for creating novel results and scholarship. One of the most recent developments in the domain of rhetoric is an attempt to approach rhetorical scholarship from the perspective of framing. To understand the relationship between these two seemingly disparate entities, it is crucial to know what counts as a frame and what its characteristic features are.

Primarily, framing entails a process of (re)constructing meaning in a restrictive manner by drawing attention to a specific dimension of reality or a phenomenon. It marshals some aspects of an event or issue and (re)configures them selectively to encourage a particular viewpoint. In short, frames emphasize some elements of reality by obscuring others. Analogically, the act of framing is akin to that of having a picture framed in a photo framework. Putting a frame on a picture is to highlight certain aspects as Jim A. Kuypers asserts “some elements of the pictures at the expense of others” (181). Framing a picture in a certain way prevails its influences upon onlookers on how the picture is to be viewed and understood. Changing a frame looks like a simple physical act of transferring one object from one location to another; however, at a deeper level, the switching triggers a ripple effect on the audience by upsetting existing perspectives and bringing in new ones. In the words of Kuypers when framed, facts and events that occur daily evoke a certain frame of mind, encouraging the audience to view them “in a particular way” (181). Thus, in the process of meaning-making of a phenomenon, as Kuypers points out framing “can be understood as taking some aspects of our reality and making them more accessible than other aspects” (181). Approached this way, the act of framing is to promote a particular perspective, interpretation, or viewpoint in place and to induce readers to see the related facts in a certain way. Framing, for Kuypers, involves amplifying some items at the expense of others and is “a process whereby communicators act—consciously or not—to construct a particular point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be viewed in a particular manner” (182). In other words, it entails a process whereby aspects of reality are portrayed and interpreted in a particular way.

Frames are contested for prominence, reflecting Sarah T. Tracy’s argument that the act of framing is a “communication that leads others to accept one meaning over another” (715). They are mediated through various cultural symbols and devices by influential and strategic social actors. Showing how frames are maneuvered in society, Tracy notes that framing is “accomplished by cultural leaders’ strategic use of a variety of organizational symbols, including metaphor, stories and myths, rituals and ceremonies, jargon, and strategic use of artifacts. All of these symbols are created and maintained through communication” (715). As Tracy believes, frames are circulated and perpetuated in human communication environment via a wide variety of cultural products.

The subtlety of how framing functions is deeply intriguing. It operates employing foreground and background, magnifying whatever it shows and obscuring the rest in a fuzzy background. This implies that framing has tremendous power in that it shapes how issues or events are interpreted or portrayed. Echoing the idea of Kuypers, Richard Andrews notes that a communicator “selects from an infinite range of possibilities and presents us with a selected viewpoint” (93). As Robert M. Entman points out, a fully-developed frame performs four specific functions: it defines, categorizes, classifies, and makes suggestions about the material world. These functions are discussed in the later paragraphs.

Media Framing

Media framing refers to the way events are portrayed in different media of communication. As a systematic and organized body of scholarship, the term framing was formally theorized by Ingrid Volkmer “in the mass media age of the 1970s” (408), when the media research made a shift from “a unidimensional media-effects model and began to address quite specific forms of media influence on audiences” (408). From the perspective of news reporting, the word framing is applied to explain by David Weiss “the process of organizing, defining, and structuring a story” (32). News coverage or

reporting is a very tricky and subtle process. Generally, journalists or reporters are supposed to communicate news in an unbiased, neutral and detached manner. However, despite this approach, journalistic reporting is riddled with nuances. According to Weiss many media scholars and researchers' arguments suggest that "even when journalists intend to be objective or balanced in their coverage, they necessarily report on issues in ways that give audiences cues as to how to understand the issues, including which aspects of the issues to focus on and which to ignore" (32). As Weiss notes, framing is inherent and unavoidable even in such a writing that is regarded as objective, balanced and unbiased -- journalistic.

Following the 1970s when there was a surge of research in the media as pointed out above, inquiry into framing took into a new lease of life, with an urge to trace the philosophical underpinning of the concept of framing. Kuypers, Tracy, and Weiss state that frames refer to the strategic way of portraying an event, issue or a fact in a particular way. Volkmer resonates with them and remarks that framing theory "aims to identify schemes in which individuals perceive the world" (407). Volkmer attempts to extend the concept by adding that frames are the "schemes" (407) that allow cues to audiences to explain and interpret a phenomenon.

Framing theory has a sociological orientation, with its conceptual lineage linking the concept back to the Canadian-American sociologist Erving Goffman. Volkmer summarizes Goffman's argument about framing as "interpretative designs" that are "central elements of cultural belief systems" (407). Volkmer elaborates Goffman's ideas even further thus:

Goffman called these interpretive designs frames that we use in our day-to-day experience to make sense of the world. Frames help interpret and reconstruct reality. Goffman's concept of frames has its conceptual roots in phenomenology, a philosophical approach that argues that the meaning of the world is perceived by individuals based on their lifeworld beliefs, experiences, and knowledge. Whereas traditionally, world meanings were conveyed through socialization. (407)

Thus, Goffman maintains what Volkmer asserts that people view social events and realities according to what he calls "cultural belief systems" (407).

By molding people's outlook, frames delimit their interpretation. In *Framing Analysis*, Goffman clarifies this idea. He notes that frames are used to define and explain the social world. He adds that people perceive events and issues via primary frameworks that would later be known as schema. Furthermore, he defines a primary framework as "neatly presentable as a system of entities, postulates, and rules" (21) that guide people to "locate, perceive, identify, and label" (21) an array of social occurrences/events. Thus, Goffman states that people are led to categorize, organize, and interpret their social/personal experiences through schema.

Goffman contends that frame plays a vital role in the meaning-making process of social activities. It emanates from a source in which knowledge about social events or facts are selected and reconfigured (26). While framing an idea, "alternative frames are generally blotted out, paving the way for the emergence of a fresh framing process" (26). Goffman also argues that a frame reflects epistemic orientation in the human cognitive faculty of mind. As Tracy points out that frames are maneuvered in human society through culturally informed schema, Goffman concurs with him and adds that frames

constitute a general framework available to people to interpret, understand, and imagine human activities and material realities.

The operation of frames and the way they influence people is subtle. Framing contrivances signification by a simultaneous process of selection and elimination. In other words, the very process of choosing a dimension of an event/issue already implicates obscuring some others of the same event. M. J. Edelman explains this interesting phenomenon thus:

[t]he character, causes and consequences of any phenomenon become radically different as changes are made in what is prominently displayed, what is repressed and especially in how observations are classified . . . [T]he social world is . . . a kaleidoscope of potential realities, any of which can be readily evoked by altering the ways in which observations are framed and categorized. (232)

This extract succinctly reinforces Edelman's observation that frames are extremely capable of altering perspectives swiftly through the process of selection and exclusion.

Gaye Tuchman in his article "Making News by Doing Work: Routinizing the Unexpected", relates the concept of framing to media. He views that the media creates social realities "through redefinition, reconsideration, and recounting in an ongoing process" (129). He captures this idea so:

Individuals, groups, and organizations not only react to and characterize events by typifying what has happened, but also they may typify events by stressing the way things happen. Of particular importance may be the way events may be practically managed, altered, or projected into future. (129-130)

In this explanation, Tuchman emphasizes the concept of typification. One significant point stands out in Tuchman's observation: typification that shapes interpretations is an act of artificial construction.

Leading on from the ideas of Goffman and of Tuchman, Robert M. Entman defines framing as "the process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation" (164). Relates frames to how the media disseminate information, Entman notes that "if the media are stunningly successful in telling people what to think about, they must also exert significant influence over what they think" (165). To Entman, the media achieve this result through two powerful tools: selection and salience. He writes that "salience accentuates a piece of information and proffers it to readers in a very noticeable manner" (392). These two tools disseminate information faster than usual.

Entman says that full-fledged frames serve four specific functions. They define a problem or an issue, show causal variables, provide moral judgment, and suggest remedies or recommendations (392). Entman also identifies "four locations" where frames are seen. These locations comprise "the communicator, the text, the receiver, and the culture" (392). First, the communicators point out the premier issue of an event, problematize it, and explain it. This whole process is, however, "guided by frames that organize their belief systems" (392). The frame functions within certain media belief systems.

Among the four locations, the text is the place where the communicator harnesses textual strategies to achieve the objective of the message. According to Entman, the communicator manipulates the textual tactics through "the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped

images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments” (392). In the case of media framing, the communication process involves “some bits of information,” “making a piece of information more noticeable,” reiterating vital statements, and “associating them with culturally familiar symbols” (392). Therefore, media text is made significant localizing the symbols.

Receivers of information is the third location where the communicators pitch their frames. In this location, the frames are contrived to “guide the receiver’s thinking and conclusion” (392). The last site, as mentioned by Entman, culture, is a key site in the entire gamut of the communication process. Cultural location, he notes, refers to “the stock of commonly invoked frames”—the frames that both the communicator and the receiver rely on (392). Further, the media text invokes cultural context, which is explained: “as the empirically demonstrable set of common frames exhibited in the discourse and thinking of most people in a social grouping” (392). In this way, frames are contingent upon a network of references and information within the cultural framework of the reader, reflecting Potter’s views that frames “convey values and ideological convictions of a group” (212). Thus, for Entman, frames become pervasive and inform people’s worldviews through the speaker, text, receiver, and conventional values.

Cultural ethos influences media framing. According to Entman, culture plays a vital role in the process of media framing. He elaborates on this issue in the article “Cascading Activation: Contesting the White House’s Frame After 9/11” published in 2003. In it, he distinguishes two important points: “cultural resonance” and the “magnitude” (417). He defines cultural resonance as having “the greatest potential for influence” (417). He also notes that culturally resonant frames employ words and images that are “noticeable, understandable, memorable, and emotionally charged” (417). Additionally, the magnitude of such images exerts a tremendous influence on readers/audiences. The concept of magnitude as referred by Entman “extent and frequency with which communicators exploit signs to frame a signification of an event” (417). Culturally resonant words and images are harnessed repeatedly and prominently in the words of Entman “the more the framing is likely to evoke similar thoughts and feelings in large proportions of the audience” (417). Entman asserts that those frames that contain culturally informed words and images have the best potential to sway people’s opinions and thoughts.

William Gamson defines a frame as “a central organizing idea” (3). Gamson echoes Entman’s concept that the act of framing allows communicators to highlight some bits of information about an item (selection) and magnify them in prominence (salience). The effect of selection and salience results in the constructing and reconstructing of meaning in the words of Gregory V. Button “in a selective manner that legitimizes some accounts while obscuring others, privileging some political agendas and negating others” (146). For researchers working within journalism, the most commonly used explanation of framing stems from Entman. He states: “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” (391). The two framing processes as mentioned in this definition entail gathering a few elements of “a perceived reality” and then structuring them into a narrative that promotes the desired interpretation on behalf of the target audience.

For Kuypers “Media texts function in two ways: agenda-setting and agenda-extension” (183). The former “focuses the public’s attention on a particular event or issue over another” and the latter “involves the influencing of the public” (183). It is at the second level of agenda-setting-- “persuasive

aspects of news coverage” (183) that the values and perspectives of the audience are “primed” (183). The rhetorical function of agenda-setting is limited to suggesting what to think. On the contrary, that of agenda extension is to tell us “How to think about an issue” (185). Kuypers writes, “it is the process whereby news stories and editorials act to shape our awareness, understanding, and evaluations of issues and events in a particular direction” (299). According to Louis A. Day Although journalism ethics suggests that the media must separate “fact” from “opinion” and provide “relevant backgrounds” to “perspectives (35), newspapers in the view of Kuypers “editors often frame issues by how they decide to tell a story” (183). The process of telling is as important as the content.

Framing analysis is a particularly useful method to understand the way the media frame the social world and what impact they produce on readers’ perception of that world. Todd Gitlin asserts that the “[m]edia frames, largely unspoken and unacknowledged, organize the world both for journalists who report it and, in some degree, for us who rely on their reports” (7). Concurring with this observation, Button notes that media frames help journalists to “organize the world; they also strongly shape how we, as readers, perceive the world” (146). As “the packages in which the central focus of a news story is developed and understood” (146), argues Button, it is necessary to examine and understand how the media frame the material world. Thus, the impact of framing in newspaper editorials is far-reaching as asserted by Judith S. Trent and Robert V. Friendenberg “structuring our social reality” (135) and for Kuypers to “strongly influencing political decision-making” and setting “government agenda” (182). Media framing influences political pronouncements and substantial government agendas.

Relationship between Rhetoric and Framing

There is a burgeoning trend to examine the ties between framing and rhetorical scholarship. Richard Andrews envisages that framing can be of immense reinforcement to expand the study of rhetoric. He states the potentiality of using a framing analysis as “a tool in the application of rhetorical study” (97). He argues that the concept of framing can be used profitably as a method to enhance and enrich the rhetorical impact of any human communicative activities and experiences. Noting that framing “is not a theory, but a “servant” to rhetoric, Andrews enumerates four distinctive functions of framing concerning rhetoric:

it is (a) the activity via which meaning is made and communicated; (b) a creative and critical resource for the rhetor and the audience; (c) a lightweight form of “scaffolding” that, once the meaning is communicated, becomes invisible and superfluous to need; and (d) flexible, adaptable, breakable, and transgressable. (97)

Showing the complementarity between framing and rhetoric for a communicative experience, Andrews expresses his enthusiasm by saying “It is almost impossible to conceive of a theory of rhetoric without the operational function of framing to enable meaningful communication to take place” (97). He reiterates the ideas of framing theorists like Entman to point out that framing remains crucial for Andrews “in a vacuum unless it is informed by functional purposes that are defined by rhetoric” (97). Andrews avers that framing is not innocuous: “Although the act of framing looks to be a neutral act, it is always informed by the rhetor’s intention and the audience’s preparedness” (97). Framing is ubiquitous, but very complex to recognize because of its subtle presence in the variegated forms of human communication. Hence, Andrews states that although a frame is “not always evident” (98) in

communication, and adds that “the power and possibilities of framing as a rhetorical device” (98) is immense and far-reaching.

The role of framing as a rhetorical apparatus has been ignored or overlooked. Andrews states that “Framing has been neglected in rhetorical studies” (98). He recognizes the importance of the two and declares that in the absence of framing, “rhetoric could be seen as ethereal, academic, and irrelevant to the operation of the world; with it, rhetoric becomes closely connected to all forms of human communication, from the literary and artistic to the mundane, from operative scores and their realization in theaters to the exchange of tickets on a bus or train” (99). In the operative act of communication, Andrews emphasizes the need to approach framing and rhetoric as complementary for each other and observes that:

If rhetoric is to have credibility in a fast-changing world, the way in which framing operates to shape the problems that encountered, the debates that take place on them, and solutions that are generated that in turn lead to consensus and action is crucial. Framing is the engine and principal operating device of rhetoric in the twenty-first century. It makes rhetoric happen (99).

The use of the framing method for rhetorical criticism seems quite compatible because the nature of media framing is to advance a particular interpretation of phenomena. To understand the rhetorical impact of a complex web of communication, framing analysis provides what Kuypers has rightly pointed out, “a particularly useful way to understand the impact of rhetoric” (182). He notes that although this method is amenable to studying “any rhetorical artifact, I feel it is particularly suited for understanding the effects of mediated communication” (182). Kuypers further adds that framing theory is “especially well-suited for comparative analysis” (198). Using this approach, “critics can compare and contrast frames across different rhetorical texts” (198).

Conclusion

This study aimed to delineate the origin and tenets of framing theory and to understand framing from a rhetorical perspective. Fundamentally, framing analysis is one of the approaches of rhetorical criticism that offers a theoretical lens to examine various issues found across a wide range of media texts. Frames make some ideas more noticeable than others. They operate by making some information more salient than others. In the process of magnifying some ideas, communicators omit, reemphasize, relegate or subordinate some others. The precursor of framing theory is Erving Goffman, who argues that people perceive social reality through what he calls schemata. Other prominent theorists and researchers invoked in this study include Robert M. Entman, Jim A. Kuypers, William Gamson, Todd Gitlin, M.J. Edelman, Gaye Tuchman and Gregory V. Button. Unanimously, they all define framing as a process whereby aspects of reality are portrayed and interpreted in a particular way.

Framing theorists explain that frames operate by means of salience and resonance. Media texts employ different frames to induce readers to filter their perception of the multidimensional world. Themes remain neutral until they are framed. According to Entman, a fully developed frame serves from problem raising to solutions through causes and judgments.

Implications

In the process of framing, readers and audiences are subjected to different frames that the media compete to impose on. As a result, they receive a filtered perception of a phenomenon. Thus, by

constantly feeding the readers with the same frames, rhetorical artifacts like newspaper editorials induce them to accept the proffered frame as the legitimate signifier to view a phenomenon. They are also likely to struggle to navigate through the maze of media interpretations. The danger here is that the confused readers imbibe a fractured view of the world offered by the media, which is quite misleading and confusing. Since framing is far from being innocuous, its implication entails significant repercussions. The key point of this study is that framing color people's opinions about what is being interpreted in the media. When the media consistently harness a certain frame about a phenomenon, they customize readers to accept a particular point of view about it, forcing them to ignore others.

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