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Frame Analysis as a Tool for Studying the Behavior of the Journalists in Media Organizations

Jaya Srivastava

Research Scholar,
School of Journalism & Mass Communication,
Apeejay Styta University,
Haryana, India

Abstract: This paper proposes framing theory as a method of understanding journalist behavior in a media organization. Journalist behavior can be studied through social constructivist or social constructionist perspectives, and the present paper attempts to highlight the method of recursive frame analysis in studying journalist behavior through the examination of conversations and framing effects in studying journalist behavior through cognitive processes. Both these methods can further our understanding of micro-level and macro-level factors in an organization that influence behavior. Thus frames manifested in organizational discourse can be studied through RFA, whereas frames as emerging in the minds of the journalists can be studied through framing effects perspective.

Keywords: media organization, journalist behavior, human relations, frame analysis, recursive frame analysis

Introduction

Research on human relations in media organizations have covered a wide array of topics – from organizational discourses, organizational environments, policy discourses and technological advancements to the dispositional factors of media organization employees. The literature of organizational behavior in media organizations is interdisciplinary in nature and has drawn from psychology, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, communication and journalism.

Despite the booming technological evolution in media industries, media organizations depend on the social capital of human creativity more than ever. James W. Redmond (2006) explains the requirement of the human potential in media organizations,

A writer can create a grammatical sentence that is flat, boring, mundane, and a turnoff for the reader. Or that person can take us on a voyage to other places with images that drift within us like motion pictures of the mind. The complex bundles of hopes, fears, dreams, and frustrations known as human beings make up media organizations (p. 115).

The present paper intends to explore framing analysis as a method for conducting research to better understand one of the most elementary and distinctive unit of media organizations – the

journalists. There is no room for debate when journalists are hailed as the backbone of a media organization. By virtue of their profession and their ethical responsibility towards society, they form a curious case for researchers to study. Indeed, what a journalist writes can move public opinion in often subtle and occasionally radical ways. Logically, media content studies obtain a

huge amount of scholarly attention and recently, this field is studied along with the situational and dispositional factors that affect journalist behavior and directly or indirectly affect media content.

Journalists do not work in a vacuum and they encounter a wide range of constraints and influences that affects their output (Harcup, 2009, p.17). There are instrumental and structural dimensions of news production in a media organization that carry weight in the resultant news product (Murdoch, 1982). Paul Hirsch (1977) contends that although mass media serve different functions with respect to other organizations, there are clear analytical similarities among the constraints on and organizational context in which reporters, writers, artists, actors, directors, editors, producers, publishers, executive vice-presidents, and others learn and carry out activities characteristic of the respective roles, crafts and occupations (as cited in Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p. 102).

Thus, the behavior of the journalist – and how do situational and disposition factors affect it - thereby indirectly influencing the media content is essential to examine. In the following sections framing theory is discussed in detail following which recursive frame analysis and framing effects as methods of studying journalist behavior are proposed. Conceptual definitions of cognitive frames, communication frames are elaborated along with a discussion on micro-level and macro-level factors influencing cognitive frames which in turn affects journalist behavior.

Framing Theory in Retrospect

The concept of framing can be traced back to the conceptions of Gregory Bateson in his 1955 paper ‘A Theory of Play and Fantasy’. The philosophical groundings of the concept of framing by the British anthropologist were constructivist in nature. However, much of the applied work on the subject has a constructionist underpinning. Whereas in the constructivist theory, individuals have a central role in processing information they encounter through cognitive processes, in the social constructionist epistemology – the formation of knowledge is ascribed to social and cultural contexts of meaning-making and knowledge production. The origins of the theory in the constructivist paradigm can be traced back to the conceptualization of ‘schema’ by Bartlett (1932) (Bewulf, 2009; van Gorp, 2006, Taanen, 1979) as an embodied, dynamic, temporal, holistic, a social concept (Wagoner, n.d.), adaptive and efficient (Livingstone, 1988, p. 91), which has been extensively studied to understand framing effects. Looking at framing from the constructivist (cognitive) or constructionist (interactional) lenses, it is always termed as an ongoing and a dynamic *process*.

While observing play between two monkeys, Bateson noted that a playful nip and an act of aggression had similar characteristics of expression, yet, the responses of each of them varied according to the metacommunicative messages that were implicit and carried a bearing with regard to the way they were to be interpreted.

Like priming, framing has been termed as an approach that is well suited in the ‘negotiation models’ (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; McQuail, 2005). These models diffused the socially constructed reality in a constant web of negotiation. According to Reese (2010), frames are *organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time that symbolically work to meaningfully structure the social world*. The term ‘organizing principles’ entails that frames employed in a communication artifact are necessarily inclusive and correspondingly exclusive in

that it falls on the communicator to shape the message in such a way that a part or an interpretation of some facts relating to an event are offered via the medium and consequently the others are denied this presence.

According to Bateson (1955), frames and context are psychological concepts and their common functions and uses are:

1. Psychological frames are exclusive, which means that by including certain messages in a frame, certain other messages are excluded.
2. Psychological frames are inclusive, i.e. by excluding certain messages, certain others are included.
3. Psychological frames are related to 'premises' in argumentative sets of messages. It is implied that practices marshaling as providing 'the entire picture' while setting a few premises in the communication messages are the ones that lead the audiences to draw conclusions from the premises presented – therefore, the ones suited best to the person communicating.
4. The picture frame tells the viewer that he is not to use the same sort of thinking in interpreting the picture that he might use in interpreting the messages outside the frame i.e. it directs the reader to follow an already rooted line of reasoning. A frame, thus, limits a particular set of messages and revives the implication in mind that the messages contained in the picture frame are mutually relevant while those outside can be overlooked.

A frame is metacommunicative i.e. any message that implicitly or explicitly defines a frame, ipso facto, also guiding the reader in his meaning-making process of the issue at hand.

Thus framing is the art of engineering messages that are guided by metacommunicative messages to shape and guide the meaning-making process of individuals. But a frame is largely influenced by previous frames (that may be adopted, neglected or negotiated) of an individual and thus the resultant understanding of an issue has multiple dimensions that vary from person to person.

The origins of research in framing studies is attributed to Erving Goffman's 1974 seminal work, *'Frame Analysis – An Essay into the Organization of Experience'*. In his ethnographic research that examined how individuals make sense of their environment and inter-personal interactions, explains that frame is a schemata of interpretation that provides the reader with a context for understanding an issue through which they can 'locate, perceive, identify and label'. Words according to Goffman are triggers that help individuals negotiate meaning through the lens of existing cultural beliefs and worldviews (as cited in Nisbet, 2010).

According to Goffman (1974), context can be defined as *'immediately available events which are compatible with one frame understanding and incompatible with others'*. Thus, frames can be defined as those set of metacommunicative messages, implicit or explicit, in which are embedded a specific line of interpretation that organizes experience, manages meaning-making

and guides action. Thus, by biasing the cognitive operations towards the contextual cues that act as references for the individuals mind, framing is eventualized.

Social constructionism follows that it is through social interaction that 'reality' takes form. It is thus created and institutionalized via the characteristics unique to the routines of everyday life in each culture. Thus, culture determines the way we look at the world and facilitates the formation of knowledge that carries idiosyncrasies with that of other societies. Therefore, frames are inextricably inter-twined, reside and emanate from within cultures. The approach to frames as cultural phenomena does not imply that all cultural concepts are frames by definition but they only become frames when someone applies them for their defining capacity (van Gorp, 2006). This presents a significant problem for the researcher to find out exactly where and how are the preferred frames construed and picked up by the organization and individuals.

What is a frame?

There are varying definitions of frames that can be found in the vast literature covering the subject. Entman, Matthes & Pelliciano (2009) define a frame through its functional specifications:

A frame repeatedly invokes the same objects and traits, using identical or synonymous words and symbols in a series of similar communications that are concentrated in time. These frames function to promote an interpretation of a problematic situation or actor and (implicit or explicit) support of a desirable response, often along with a moral judgment that provides an emotional charge. (p. 177)

Following Kinders & Sanders (1990), frames can be identified in two predominant domains – (1) in organizational discourse advanced by the management and that takes form in everyday conversations, and (2) internal structures of mind that help individuals in giving meaning to and organizing events to make sense of them i.e. psychological frames, in terms of studying organizational communication.

Intra-Organization Communication and Individual-level frames

Intra-Organization communication frames can be termed as those individual-level or communication frames that are sponsored by different elements of the organizational structure in a media organization along with those residing in the media organization culture that have an effect on the journalist and therefore, the media content produced by the journalist.

Individual level frames do not only refer to the employee frames, but also the management and the relevant stakeholder's frames, since at cognitive level frames reside and work in all of these. The term '*cognitive frame*' is preferred in the literature while talking about individual level frames. A cognitive frame is a '*consistent set of activated cognitive schemas*' (Scheufele & Scheufele, 2010). Simply put, cognitive frames help the recipient interpret the world by allowing knowledge to be represented in a meaningful way (Rizello, 2003) by activating the relevant cognitive schemas. A cognitive schema is 'a cognitive representation of objects or relation between objects' which help in classifying and processing information (Scheufele & Scheufele, 2010).

Following Dietram A. Scheufele (1999), communication frames (that arise in conversations, discussions, meetings, corporate communications media, policies, reports, guidelines, etc. in an organization) work by ‘influencing the way recipients think about an issue by invoking interpretive schemas that influence the interpretation of incoming information’ (p. 309). Communication frames may help in setting the terms of debate among employees but have to be integrated with frames that are contrived in the minds of the employees through personal experiences, conversation (Nisbet, 2010) and reflection.

Intra-Organization Factors affecting the individual-level Journalists’ psychological frame

Like other organizations, news-media organizations also have an organizational structure that helps in routinizing news gathering, increasing organizational efficiency through gathering, sorting and producing news (Murphy, 2007, p. 120). Both macro- and micro-level factors influence media content by affecting the values, attitude and beliefs of the journalist. Micro-level factors such as communicator’s professional background and experiences shape their professional roles and ethics which has a directly influences media content (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Peiser, 2000; Reese, 2001; Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim & Wrigley, 2001; Reese, 2011). Factors like personal attitudes, values and beliefs of a journalist have an indirect effect on media content which depends on the power that the journalist enjoys in an organization and whether the extent of the power is sufficient to repudiate organizational routines and/or professional values (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).

Macro-level factors like media routines, organizational level, extramedia level and ideological level factors have a marked impact and a direct effect on media content (Reese & Shoemaker, 1996; McQuail, 2005) by affecting journalist attitude, belief, intent and perception. Economic considerations – economic dictates and logic (Russell, 2006; Shoemaker & Reese, 2001; Coulson, 1994; Gans, 1979; Sigal, 1973); ownership and policy (Breed, 1955; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Foley, 2000; Hamilton, 2004; Cho, Kong & Lin, 2004); media routines (Tuchman, 1978; Hallin, 1992; Molotch & Lester, 1974; Dunnywood & Peters, 1992; Dunnywood & Griffin, 1993), media organization roles and structures effect the journalist output. Journalists’ conversations and discussions amongst each other may also alter the psychological frames of reference. This is especially true when communication occurs between two people situated at different hierarchical levels in an organization. The above mentioned intra-organization factors lead a journalist to sometimes consciously and at other times unconsciously sponsor a frame in news reports and news discussions.

Recursive Frame Analysis as a method to study the Behavior of the Journalist

Ronald J. Chenail (1991, 1995) developed a qualitative technique for the purpose of analyzing narratives, conversation and other types of discourses. Recursive frame analysis (RFA) as a method has chiefly been used to study therapeutic conversations. Keeney & Chenail (as cited in Chenail, 1995) extended the conceptualizations of Bateson (1972) and Goffman (1974) to the examination of talk. RFA draws from both linguistics and psychology, and can be situated in the social constructivist paradigm. The method is based on the premise that people actively construct meaning and achieve sense-making through language – by arranging and rearranging words. Words are constantly contextualized by the communicators or the recipients of the message by virtue of their varying experiences. *To contextualize or to frame a word is to connect it with other words and context is built by the ways we connect words with other words in conversations*

(Chenail, 1995). In RFA, the term recursive acknowledges the perspective that text and context are continually contextualized by other texts and contexts. Meanings are constantly negotiated as the relationship between text and context is analyzed. The cognitive frames we think have a recursive relationship with the linguistic frames we speak or hear.

Drawing from Keeney (1991, 1987), Chenail (1995) explains the notational system of analyzing talks and texts in RFA, in which words are marked as frames, contextual groupings of words as galleries and the creation of meaning as recursion. Recordings of conversations are required to be viewed or listened to followed by examining the transcript of the discourse that is required to be studied. RFA is a sequential analysis through which semantic shifts in a conversation or text can be noted. Noting actualizes in two steps: Firstly, the observer 'notes' the differences originating in a conversation or text, following which he makes personal interpretations of the noting made. For the interpretation of talk, 'figure of speeches' are created by the RFA analyst.

In listening to the talk, recursive frame analysts become sensitive or curious to differences in the conversation. For example, where and when does the content being discussed by the participants change? Are questions answered? Are answers questioned? How does it make "sense" that one speaker says "X" after another speaker says "Y," or how does it make sense that after one speaker says "Y," that another speaker does not say "X"? Somehow, in some way, recursive frame analysts have to try to make sense of the "what" and the "how" of conversations. What text seems to go with what context? What new meanings are generated if the text becomes the context and vice versa? (as cited in Chenail, 1995).

This occurs when the observer organizes the flow of the conversation drawing out what the logic of the narrative is from his perspective. The practice helps in *naming the talk* i.e. what is it that is being said in the conversation from the viewpoint of the observer. This way the patterns of differences in a conversation can be developed by the analyst for later inquiry. The observer(s) examines two things: (1) the way they observe the process by which the content of the talk develops in a conversation, and (2) when do they observe changes in subjects in a conversation i.e. they pay attention to the way in which things are being said by the speakers. Thus, phonetic, semantic and pragmatic differences can be listed to understand the pattern of the talk. A frame in RFA, is termed as a basic pattern of meaning created by the listener (Chenail, 1995).

After listing all the frames used in a conversation, the identified frames are then 'chunked' into galleries by virtue of having some common characteristics among them. The aim of the RFA analyst is to understand the differences arising in a conversation. As Chenail (1995) puts it,

Somehow, in some way, recursive frame analysts have to try to make sense of the "what" and the "how" of conversations. What text seems to go with what context? What new meanings are generated if the text becomes the context and vice versa? As these musings take shape, recursive frame analysts draw their re-presentations or figures of speech to visualize how the conversation is taking shape.

RFA can be of much use to understand organizational discourse and study the linguistic frames arising in a text or a conversation in conjugation with the cognitive frames (through framing effects – discussed in the following section). The interaction patterns of the journalists with the following can be studied to understand their meaning-making process:

1. Management
2. Editors
3. Senior journalists
4. Fellow journalists and photographers
5. Sources

Both micro-level factors and macro-level factors affecting journalist behavior can be examined through RFA. These elements affecting journalist behavior are often manifested in conversations and they can be analyzed by studying semantic shifts in talks.

Framing Effects

Framing effect can be termed as occurring when a message causes an individual to form a specific judgment, attitude or opinion due to the emphasis in the message on a subset of potentially relevant considerations (Druckman, 2001). Framing effects research attempts to understand the impact of frames on individual opinion (individual-level framing effects) or at aggregate levels. *The frame that a decision-maker adopts is controlled partly by the formulation of the problem and partly by the norms, habits and personal characteristics of the decision maker* (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). Elsewhere (Slothuus, 2008) it has been contended that the effect of a frame largely on the receivers' cognitive schemata. Thus, the interpretation derived from the reception of any message is a simultaneous function of both the message (and how it is framed) and the knowledge the recipients bring to bear during the process of interpretation (Cappella & Jamieson, 1993, p. 44).

Framing effects can be very useful in understanding the cognitive mechanisms of the journalist when they are presented with information in an organization, and also the effect any information will have on the content produced by the journalist. Thus situational or dispositional factors affecting journalist behavior can be studied by framing effects. Both micro-level factors and macro-level factors affecting journalist perception, attitude, intent and belief and the link between these factors and journalist behavior can be examined through analysis of framing effects.

Scholars investigating framing effects have found that framing effects are not pervasive. Rather, they occur in certain circumstances on certain individuals. Thus there are various moderating variables that are present at individual-level or circumstantial level that potentially intensify or diminish framing effects and sometimes even invalidate them (Lecheler, de Vreese & Slothuus, 2009, p. 297). Moderators of emphasis framing effects identified in the framing literature are: predispositions such as knowledge (Nelson et al., 1997), values, and strong predisposition (Chong & Druckman, 2007b), deliberation, political information (political sophistication/awareness) (Nelson et al., 1997; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Kinders & Sanders, 1990), source credibility (Druckman, 2001), counter-frames or competition (Druckman, 2001a; Chong & Druckman, 2007b), issue salience (Lecheler, de Vreese & Slothuus, 2009), type of issue being framed (de Vreese & Lecheler, 2012; Iyengar, 1991), passage of time and repeated exposure to frames. *Mediators* function as the indirect mechanism through which an independent variable influences a dependent variable (as cited in de Vreese, 2003). A mediator is a third variable that explains how or why two other variables are related and thus, it intervenes in the relation between an independent variable and the outcome demonstrating the mechanism through which the two variables are related (Fairchild, 2008). This part answers the *how* question i.e. how do

frames affect opinion. According to Rune Slothuus (2008), in framing literature three basic processes that can potentially mediate framing effects have been identified: (1) belief importance (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2012; de Vreese, 2010; Druckman, 2001a; Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997; Nelson & Oxley, 1999), (2) belief content change (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2012; Lecheler, de Vreese & Slothuus, 2009, Slothuus, 2008) and (3) accessibility change (Slothuus, 2008).

Through the understanding of moderators and mediators of framing effects, the effect of the above mentioned variables on journalist behavior could be studied. Surveys and experiments are the most basic ways of evaluating the effect of the mediators and moderators on an individual.

Discussion

Framing analysis as a method to understand organizational discourse, communication frames and cognitive frames could prove to be of great importance as a method to understand the micro-level and macro-level factors influencing journalist behavior. Recursive frame analysis can be studied from a social constructionist perspective and also from a social constructivist perspective. From the social constructionist perspective, RFA is sufficient for studying organizational discourse manifested mainly through conversations. From the social constructivist perspective, framing effects theory could help in gaining a well-rounded understanding of journalist behavior.

Framing analysis expands the scope of the inquiry to investigate both issue-specific and generic frames. Issue-specific frames are those frames that are applicable to only a certain topic, issue, type of event or situation, whereas generic frames are those frames that are applicable and can be identified across themes, issues, situations. Thus a better understanding of phenomena's under study can be obtained with the method. Although, the present paper explores RFA as a method to understand the journalist of the behavior in a media organization, the interdisciplinary roots of the theory make it applicable in studying organizational discourse, employee behavior, communication and cognitive frames in different organizations and institutions.

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