

# Framing Public Life: Perspectives on Media and Our Understanding of the Social World (Routledge Comm

## Prologue--Framing public life

### A bridging model for media research

Stephen D. Reese

Chapter in *Framing Public Life: Perspectives on Media and our Understanding of the Social World*. Stephen Reese, Oscar Gandy, and August Grant (eds.), pp. 7-31. (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2001).

Within the last several years, the concept of framing has become increasingly attractive in media research, finding its way into a number of related fields--including communication, sociology, and political science. Framing refers to the way events and issues are organized and made sense of, especially by media, media professionals, and their audiences. Sociologist Erving Goffman (1974) is often credited with introducing the framing approach, along with the anthropologist-psychologist Gregory Bateson (1972), whom Goffman credited with originating the metaphor. Within their social-psychological perspective we consider how people rely on expectations to make sense of their everyday social experience. A similar but more sociological approach has been more typically applied to questions of framing in media and communication research and opened an important field of analysis: Precisely how are issues constructed, discourse structured, and meanings developed? (e.g., Gamson, 1989; 1992).<sup>1</sup>

Framing has been particularly useful in understanding the media's role in political life. Although it need not be restricted this way, I adopt this focus in the discussion below. Under this approach issues are not unproblematic; labeling, classifying, and reducing them to a simple theme is not the straightforward task performed elsewhere in studies of news content. As a both a noun and verb, the word "frame" suggests an active process and a result. Entman (1993) refers to framing as a fractured paradigm, but like the communication field itself its inter-disciplinary nature makes it attractive. When viewed as the interplay of media practices, culture, audiences, and producers, the framing approach guards against unduly compartmentalizing components of communication (sender, content, audience). As with any theoretical formulation, we must consider what aspects of the social world are better explained with it, and which are obscured.

The framing approach bridges the competing tendencies of social analysis toward closure and openness and may be regarded as one of its strengths. On one hand, traditional behavioral social science strives for data reduction and parsimony, measuring the accumulation of emphasis in the observed and explicit. Quantification's precise measurement makes it preferred by many scholars, but the most important frame may not be the most frequent. So, on the other hand, the qualitative turn of much framing analysis

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