QUALITATIVE NEWS FRAME ANALYSIS: A METHODOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

Framing theory has become increasingly popular in media analysis. The idea of framing is based largely upon the book by sociologist Erving Goffman (1974) titled Frame Analysis: An essay on the organization of experience. *Goffman used the idea of frames to label "schemata of interpretation" that allow people "to locate, perceive, identify, and label" occurrences or events. With Robert Entman's 1993 paper, frame analysis evolved into an important methodology. Since Goffman introduced the concept of frame analysis and Entman applied framing to the analysis of mass media, researchers have utilised it to understand how print and other media present information. Consequently for the last almost four decades, leading media scholars have applied the concept of framing to explain how the media structure their delivery of news, promoting certain interpretations of events by selecting certain facts. Frame analysis serves four main purposes within the context of media research – to define problems, to diagnose a course, to make value judgments, and to suggest remedies (Entman 1993: 52). In this article, the authors review the meaning of the concept of frame analysis, approaches to studying news framing, and qualitative news frame analysis. After defining news frames, we articulate a method for identifying news frames in print media.*

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INTRODUCTION

Mass media have a powerful effect on the world view of society. "The entire study of mass communication," McQuail (1994: 327) writes, "is based on the premise that the media have significant effects." Mass media frame "images of reality… in a predictable and patterned way" (McQuail 1994: 331).

The mass media have the greatest potential for powerful societal effects in:

   ♦ attracting and directing public attention;

   ♦ persuading in matters of opinion and belief;

   ♦ influencing behaviour;

   ♦ structuring definitions of reality;

   ♦ conferring status and legitimacy; and

   ♦ informing speedily and broadly (McQuail 1994: 69).

Cohen (1963: 13), almost two decades before McQuail, wrote in his famous dictum that the press "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling readers what to think about… The world will look different to different people, depending … on the map that is drawn for them by writers, editors, and publishers of the papers they read."

Two media effects, known as long-term or cognitive theories, are the agenda-setting theory and the framing theory. Fourie (2001: 298) defines cognitive as "our faculty of knowing and understanding something in a specific way and how we base our behaviour and thinking on such knowledge".

Agenda-setting is often called first level agenda-setting; framing second-level agenda-setting. According to Jasperson, Shah, Watts, Faber and Fan (1998: 206), "the traditional agenda-setting concept attempts to explain only why one issue becomes more important than another issue in the public's mind; it does not explicitly focus on the nuances of coverage within an issue". Framing, on the other hand, "provides a means of describing the power of communication to direct individual cognitions towards a prescribed interpretation of a situation or object" (Jasperson *et al.* 1998: 206).

WHAT ARE NEWS FRAMES?

Although there is no widely accepted definition of framing, those that have evolved strongly resemble one another. As Gaye Tuchman writes in *Making news: A study in the construction of reality* (1978: 1):

> News is a window on the world, and through its frame, Americans learn of themselves and others, of their institutions, leaders, and life styles, and those of other nations and other peoples. The news aims to tell us what we want to know, need to know, and should know. But, like any frame that delineates a world, a news frame may be problematic. The view through a window depends upon whether the window is large or small, has many panes or few, whether the glass is opaque or clear, whether the window faces a street or a backyard.

Goffman (1974) defines a frame as "the principles of organization which govern events – at least social ones – and our subjective involvement in them". This "schemata of interpretation" helps people to "locate, perceive, identify, and label" everyday events (Goffman 1974: 21). Journalists use "frames (to) organize strips of the everyday world, a strip being an arbitrary slice or cut from the stream of on-going activity" (Goffman 1974: 10-11). Similarly Tuchman (1978: 193) elucidates: "An occurrence is transformed into an event, and an event is transformed into a news story. The news frame organizes everyday reality and the news frame is part and parcel of everyday reality, for the public character of news is an essential feature of news."

For Gamson and Modigliani (1989: 3) a frame is a "central organizing idea for making sense of relevant events, suggesting what is at issue", while for Gitlin (1980: 7) frames "help journalists to process large amounts of information quickly and routinely package the information for efficient relay to their audiences".

Reese (in Reese, Gandy & Grant 2003: 11) provides a thorough working definition of frames: Frames are *organising principles* that are socially *shared* and *persistent* over time, that work *symbolically* to meaningfully *structure* the social world:

- *Organising:* Framing varies in how successfully, comprehensively, or completely it organises information.

- *Principles:* The frame is based on an abstract principle and is not the same as the texts through which it manifests itself.

- *Shared:* The frame must be shared on some level for it to be significant and communicable.

- *Persistent:* The significance of frames lies in their durability, their persistent and routine use over time.

- *Symbolically:* The frame is revealed in symbolic forms of expression.

- *Structure:* Frames organise by providing identifiable patterns or structures, which can vary in their complexity.

Cole C. Campbell on PoynterOnline (n.d.: online) puts it in more simple terms: "Frames are efficient ways to sort information and create stories. They connect journalists' work to the common understandings of our communities and the larger culture. They make facts meaningful. Frames create 'reality'."

WHAT IS NEWS FRAMING?

Framing has been described as a concept, an approach, a theory, a class of media effects, a perspective, an analytical technique, a paradigm, and a multiparadigmatic research programme (D'Angelo & Kuypers 2010: 2).

As stated by Entman (2007: 4) in his oft-cited definition, framing is "the process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights the connections among them to promote a particular interpretation".

"News is anything but a true reflection of reality." This is the assertion Oosthuizen (in Fourie 2001: 465) makes, and this is the crux of the framing theory. Oosthuizen adds that news, rather, "is a frame or window on reality that seeks to or can only reflect part of this reality."

Terkildsen and Schnell (1997: 881) suggest that "framing is important whenever an issue can be presented in multiple ways which may potentially influence how people think about an issue". Frames, Gamson and Modigliani (1987: 144) opine, "imply an implicit answer as to what should be done about an issue".

For Pan and Kosicki (1993: 53), framing highlights certain parts of an issue allowing "the selected elements to become important in influencing individuals' judgments". According to Van Gorp (2007: 14), selection and construction form the foundation of framing. Hertog and McLeod (1995: 4) assert that the "frame used to interpret an event determines what available information is relevant (and thereby what is irrelevant)".

Referring to the factors that could influence how a journalist frames an issue, Scheufele (1999: 109) names societal norms and values, organisational constraints, pressure from interest groups, journalistic routines, and the journalist's ideological orientations. Van Gorp (2007: 14) suggests that "there is an interaction between the journalist's (un)conscious selection of a frame as a result of the individual belief system, and the influence of additional factors inside and outside the media organization".

According to Fourie (2001: 305), framing "describes the influence on the public of news angles used by journalists". Van Gorp (2005: 485) argues similarly that "a typical characteristic of framing is the linkage between, on the one hand, the journalistic approach of shaping the news within a frame of reference and according to a latent structure of meaning and, on the other hand, the stimulation

of the public to adopt these frames and to view reality from the same perspective as journalists do".

Qing (2000: 666) explains the framing process as follows:

> News is a representation of the world mediated via the journalist. Like every discourse, it constructively patterns that of which it speaks. Differences in expression carry ideological distinctions and thus differences in representation. The content of news stories therefore represents ideas, beliefs, values, theories, and ideology. The major role of news language as discourse is to supply the categories imposed by the journalist on the event itself.

FRAMING AS A METHODOLOGICAL STRATEGY

Scholars employ different methodological approaches to frame analysis. Some studies used quantitative content analysis or computer-assisted frame analysis (such as frame mapping), while others prefer a text-based interpretative, qualitative approach.

According to Pan and Kosicki (1993: 57), utilising framing as a methodological strategy requires "constructing and processing discourse or characteristics of the discourse itself". Reese (in Reese *et al.* 2001: 1) adds: "The framing approach bridges the competing tendencies of social analysis toward closure and openness and may be regarded as one of its strengths."

According to Reese (2007: 1), framing's value, however, "does not hinge on its potential as a unified research domain but as a provocative model that bridges parts of the field that need to be in touch with each other: quantitative and qualitative, empirical and interpretive, psychological and sociological, and academic and professional". Frame analysis serves the following purposes within the context of media research: to define problems, to diagnose courses, to make value judgments, and to suggest remedies (Entman 1993: 52).

Wimmer and Dominick (2006: 152-153) add that news frame analysis, as a form of qualitative content analysis, could be conducted for these media research purposes:

- Describing communication content;
- Comparing media content to the "real world"; and
- Establishing a starting point for studies of media effects.

Reese (2007: 10) states that the "qualitative approach to framing analysis helps resist the reductionistic urge to sort media texts and discourse into containers

and count their size or frequency. Indeed, some define frames as an inherently qualitative construct. In this case, one must capture the meanings embedded in the internal relations within texts, which collapsing into reductive measures would obscure."

Pan and Kosicki (1993:58) argue that framing analysis differs from other approaches to news texts in the following ways:

- First, "instead of conceiving news texts as psychological stimuli with identifiable meanings", it rather "views news texts as consisting of organised symbolic devices that interact with individual agents' memory for meaning construction";

- Second, "framing analysis is not constrained within a content-free structuralist approach of news discourse". Rather, "it accepts both the assumption of the rule-governed nature of text formation and the multi-dimensional conception of news texts that will allow for cognitive shortcuts in news production and consumption";

- Third, "the validity of framing analysis does not rest on researchers' resourceful reading of news texts. Rather, it retains the systematic procedures of gathering data of news texts in order to identify the signifying elements that might be used by audience members"; and

- Finally, "it does not assume the presence of frames in news texts independent of readers of the texts".

Qualitative vs. quantitative frame analysis

"Not all communication can be measured quantitatively," according to Wood (2004: 69), "and quantitative data cannot provide substantial insight into the texture and meaning of experiences." Wood (*ibid*.) argues that "qualitative methods are valuable when we wish not to count or measure phenomena but to understand the character of experience, particularly how people perceive and make sense of their communication experience. This involves interpreting meanings and other unobservable dimensions of communication". Kelle, Prein and Bird (1995: 3) observe that "the central analytic task in qualitative research is understanding the meaning of texts".

Du Plooy (1997: 33), in similar vein, says that "qualitative inquiry is analytic and interpretative". Furthermore, "it attempts to examine phenomena in a holistic manner". Du Plooy (*ibid.*) states that "the nature of the data and the research problem dictate the research methodology".

Van Gorp (2007: 72-73) is a proponent of a mixed-methodology approach to frame analysis. He suggests using quantitative techniques to examine overall trends in large data sets, and qualitative techniques to examine subtle framing effects in smaller data sets.

Qualitative frame analysis

Qualitative frame analysis, according to Reese (in D'Angelo & Kuypers 2010: 18), emphasises the cultural and political content of news frames and "how they draw upon a shared store of social meanings". For Gitlin (1980: 303), qualitative analysis pursues a level of complexity that "does justice to the complexity of media artefacts".

Connolly-Ahern and Broadway (2008: 369) explain the concept of qualitative frame analysis as follows: "Qualitative framing analysis involves repeated and extensive engagement with a text and looks holistically at the material to identify frames". These authors (*ibid*.) state that this approach to frame analysis examines the key words and metaphors in the text, identifying what was included in the frame, as well as what was left out; recognising "that the words repeated most often in the text may not be the most important".

Criticism against qualitative frame analysis

Two major problems, highlighted by researchers in regards to framing research, are reliability and validity. One threat to validity in qualitative frame analysis is how the frames are operationally defined. According to D'Angelo and Kuypers (2010: 46), researchers tend to "reinvent the wheel" when identifying news frames.

For Klandermans and Staggenborg (2002: 62), frame analysis poses challenges relating to data collection, analysis and the final presentation of results. The first challenge involves definitions and concepts, as distinctions between news frames frequently are indistinct, while the second challenge involves verification and proof.

Other criticism against qualitative framing analysis comes from Tankard (in Reese *et al*. 2001: 98) who observes that "this approach makes frame identification a rather subjective process" as "researchers might tend to define frames in a stereotypical or conventional way".

For D'Angelo and Kuypers (2010: 37) a qualitative approach can be challenging when definite categories are not immediately obvious and "no easy coding scheme into which textual units can be sorted is evident". More criticism against this approach is that it is time consuming as an inductive frame analysis needs to be done before a list of frames can be drawn up (D'Angelo & Kuypers 2010: 104).

A typology of media frames

An examination of past framing research shows two main types of media frames: issue-specific frames and generic frames. The first type of media frame "is pertinent only to specific topics or events", while generic frames "transcend thematic limitations" and can be identified in relation to certain topics (De Vreese 2005: 54).

The disadvantage of an issue-specific approach says De Vreese (2005), is that it makes "analyses difficult to generalise, compare, and use as empirical evidence for theory building". According to Hertog and McLeod (2001: 150, in De Vreese 2005: 55), this approach has led researchers to "too easily find evidence for what they are looking for" and to add to "one of the most frustrating tendencies in the study of frames and framing, the tendency for scholars to generate a unique set of frames for every study".

Neuman, Just and Crigler (1992: 74) identified five common frames utilised by the media. They are human impact; powerlessness; economics; moral values; and conflict:

- the human impact frame focuses on "descriptions of individuals and groups affected by an issue";
- the powerlessness frame refers to "the dominance of forces over weak individuals or groups";
- the economics frame reflects "the preoccupation with profit and loss";
- the moral values frame refers to "morality and social prescriptions"; and
- the conflict frame deals with the news media's "game interpretation of the political world as an on-going series of contests, each with a new set of winners and losers".

Semetko and Valkenburg (2000, in De Vreese 2005: 56), took Neuman, Just and Crigler's research further. They identified five frames, namely conflict; human interest; attribution of responsibility; morality; and economic consequences. Their definitions for these frames are similar to those of Neuman *et al.*'s, apart from the human interest frame, which they define as "bringing a human face or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue or problem". Their conflict frame, which is broader than Neuman *et al.*'s, refers to "conflict between individuals, groups, institutions or countries". Semetko and Valkenburg's frame typology does not include powerlessness. Instead their fifth frame is attribution of responsibility, which is defined as "presenting an issue or problem in such a way as to attribute responsibility for causing or solving to either the government or to an individual or group" (2000, in De Vreese 2005: 56).

CONDUCTING A FRAME ANALYSIS OF NEWS MEDIA

The following section contains an explanation of how to conduct a straightforward qualitative news frame analysis. The methodology is based on the above analysis of the literature, a comparison of previous news frame analyses, as well as the authors' personal experience of conducting frame analyses. For ease of explanation the process is set out in a series of steps, with steps 5-7 comprising the actual news frame analysis.

As part of the formulation of the research problem (Du Plooy 2009: 55), the following details regarding the news frame analysis should be determined beforehand:

Step 1: Choose a medium / topic

Select the media form of choice for the study. This would obviously be informed by the research problem, for example a comparison of the framing of a specific event, group, action, etc. by two or more publications, or even two or more media (e.g. radio vs. television). Newspapers are a good choice for a medium of analysis as, according to McNair (2000: 136), they are able to "communicate more complex ideas", as opposed to television and radio. This does not imply that broadcast or electronic media cannot be the focus of a news frame analysis.

Step 2: Determine a time-frame

Once a topic/medium has been selected, the researcher has to determine a time-frame. It is important to explain why this specific period is of significance.

Step 3: Draw a sample

The time-frame forms the parameters for defining the universe from which a sample is to be drawn.

Step 4: Identify a unit of analysis

According to Wimmer and Dominick (2006: 158), the unit of analysis is crucial. In written content, according to these authors, "the unit of analysis might be a single word or symbol, a theme, or an entire article or story". The unit of analysis in frame analysis often is individual news articles which appeared in the selected newspaper during the selected study period.

Step 5: Selection of a frame typology

The selection of news frames is crucial to the success of a frame analysis. As mentioned earlier, the selection of frames could be done inductively, where frames emerge as the research progresses. The researcher selects news frames by

conducting a pilot study using randomly selected news articles from the sample. Usually the stories will be selected from the articles used in the final study. In the pilot study, each news article is read several times, while the researcher makes thorough notes, and thereafter the news frames are decided on.

Often researchers are led by the standard news frames identified in previous framing analyses such as the conflict frame, the attribution of responsibility frame, the economic consequences frame, and the human interest frame (Scheufele 1999: 106; Neuman, Just & Crigler 1992: 64, Semetko & Valkenburg 2000, in De Vreese 2005: 56). This is referred to as the deductive approach.

Once a decision has been made on the process of selecting frames for the study, the researcher can decide to identify either only a dominant frame in each of the news articles, or a dominant and secondary frame in each of the news articles. The dominant frame is the main theme of the news article, while the secondary frame is a supplementary idea that supports the main theme.

Step 6: Operational definitions

The researcher has to provide operational definitions of selected news frames. According to Wood (2004: 65), "operational definitions are precise descriptions that specify the phenomena of interest". If the concepts have been studied by other researchers, it is advisable to consider their definitions. Wood says "this allows different researchers to use concepts in the same ways, and thus their findings can be compared and related".

According to De Vreese (2005: 53), many researchers prefer to apply concise operational definitions of frames, which are decided on before the study begins. Capella and Jamieson (1997:89, in De Vreese 2005: 54) are among those who support this approach. They suggest the following criteria for a frame:

- a frame must have identifiable conceptual and linguistic characteristics;
- it should be commonly observed in journalistic practice;
- it must be possible to distinguish the frame reliably from other frames; and
- a frame must be recognised by others and not be a figment of a researcher's imagination.

Step 7: Identifying news frames

The process of identifying news frames can only begin once the "groundwork" (steps 1-6) has been laid. The identification of news frames requires the researcher to know "how" to look for frames, as well as "what" to look for when identifying frames.

The "how" of identifying news frames is based on Wimmer and Dominick's (2006: 117-118) constant comparative technique for qualitative research analysis, which consists of four steps:

♦ Comparative assignment of incidents to categories (or frames);

♦ Elaboration and refinement of categories/frames;

♦ Searching for relationships and themes among categories/frames; and

♦ Simplifying and integrating data into a coherent theoretical structure.

Similarly, Alozie (2005: 66) suggests the following:

♦ Phase 1: General multiple reading of the articles while taking descriptive notes about the content;

♦ Phase 2: A second reading to identify certain recurring themes, frames, values and topic categories; and

♦ Phase 3: In-depth interpretation of the articles.

The "what" of identifying frames implies that the researcher analyses the text for "symbolic devices" or "signature elements" that are located within news stories (Gamson & Lasch 1983: 399). There are several devices used to frame a specific event/story. The research problem will guide the researcher in terms of whether to look for a single framing device (such as news sources) or multiple framing devices.

For the purposes of this article, these framing devices will be divided into two categories: rhetorical devices and technical devices.

Rhetorical devices

Rhetorical devices include word choice, metaphors, and exemplars. Other devices that can be examined are "the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgement" (Entman 1993: 52).

Gamson and Lasch (1983: 407-408) offer comment on the above-mentioned:

♦ Metaphors: They always has two parts – the principal subject that the metaphor is intended to illuminate and the associated subject that the metaphor invokes to enhance readers' understanding;

♦ Exemplars: While metaphors rely on imagined events to frame the principal subject, real events of the past or present are frequently used for the same purpose;

- ◆ Catch-phrases: Commentators on events frequently try to capture them in a single theme statement, tag-line, title or slogan that is intended to suggest a frame. Catch-phrases are attempted summary statements about the principal subject; and

- ◆ Depictions: News stories have certain principal subjects that they characterise in a particular fashion. They may do this through metaphors or exemplars or through a string of modifiers.

Pan and Kosicki (1993: 59-61) add the following:

- ◆ syntactical structures which refer to patterns in the arrangements of words or phrases;

- ◆ script structures, referring to the fact that most news reports cover newsworthy events and that news is expected to help link audiences with their environment;

- ◆ thematic structures, which refer to a multilayer hierarchy with a theme being the central core connecting various sub-themes as the major nodes that are connected to supporting statements; and

- ◆ rhetorical structures, which describe "the stylistic choices made by journalists in relation to their intended effects".

Technical devices

Technical devices include various elements of news-writing, as well as technical elements such as layout and visuals. Tankard (in Reese *et al*. 2003: 101) suggests the following technical framing devices:

- ◆ headlines;

- ◆ subheadings;

- ◆ photo captions;

- ◆ leads;

- ◆ source selection;

- ◆ quote selection; and

- ◆ concluding statements and paragraphs.

News sources are considered important framing devices. According to Pan and Kosicki (1993: 60), who is quoted, how they are identified, and where the quote is placed in the story is important.

These authors (*ibid.*) add that quotes are used as effective framing devices by "quoting experts to claim empirical validity or facticity; by quoting official sources to link certain points of view to authority; and by quoting a social deviant to marginalise certain points of view".

Headlines are another important indicator of the frame of a news story. As Pan and Kosicki (1993: 59) observe, "a headline is the most salient cue to activate certain semantically related concepts in readers' minds: it is thus the most powerful framing device of syntactical structure".

Table 1 provides a checklist for framing devices:

TABLE 1:   FRAMING DEVICES

Category	Examples
Rhetorical and other written/grammatical devices	Word choice; Metaphors; Exemplars Key words (presence and/or absence) Stock phrases (presence and/or absence) Sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgement Concluding statements and paragraphs
Technical devices (elements of news-writing, layout, visuals)	Headlines; Subheadings; Photo captions; Leads; Photographs; Layout (prominence of the article) Page placement (front page, etc.)
	All sources of information in article Who is quoted How are they identified Where is the quote placed in the story
	Quoting experts to claim empirical validity or facticity Quoting official sources to link certain points of view to authority Quoting a social deviant to marginalise certain points of view

CONCLUSION

Journalists are considered "sense makers", but it is important to acknowledge that they may also present the news in such a way that it distorts as much as it attempts to make sense of our world (Reese 2001: 10). News frame analysis poses pertinent questions in this regard to those involved in the manufacturing and dissemination of news.

A qualitative news frame analysis can be done to achieve various media research purposes. These include defining problems, diagnosing courses, making value judgments, and suggesting remedies (Entman 1993: 52). In addition, it can describe communication content, test hypotheses of message characteristics, compare media content to the "real world", assess the image of particular groups in society, and establish a point from which media effects can be studied (Wimmer & Dominick 2006: 152-153).

Areas of concern regarding this methodology remain the subjectivity of the process, coupled with the fact that consensus on a standard frame typology does not exist yet. Although a combination of Neuman, Just and Crigler's (1992: 74) five frames (human impact; powerlessness; economics; moral values; and conflict) and Semetko and Valkenburg's (2000, in De Vreese 2005: 56) five frames (conflict; human interest; attribution of responsibility; morality; and economic consequences) are often used as a "standard" typology, many variations as well as completely new (and often surprising) frames continue to emerge from studies. This makes it difficult to distinguish qualitative news frame analysis as a research technique that is specifically applicable to the discipline of journalism. The aim of this article was to provide a step in this direction by attempting to provide a methodology for conducting a basic qualitative news frame analysis.

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