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Communication, contextualization & cognition: Patterns & processes of frames' influence on people's interpretations of the EU constitution

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Introduction

In most common language uses of the term, a frame refers to a structure that surrounds and supports something else - something which is the actual focus of attention. When the concept took off in the study of communication, the role of the frame was the same: Researchers studied frames as the context structure that surrounded something they were primarily interested in (e.g., Graber, 1988; Iyengar, 1991; Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992). Quickly they were fascinated by the difference that frames could make to the perception of the same image. The interest in frames gained in momentum, and framing incrementally advanced from being an approach to the study of other things to becoming the focus of study itself: Frames became the image.

At the same time, researchers have developed their perceptions as to what frames are made of. For uncounted times over the last decade, reviewers have complained about applications that, in their views, should not be called framing, and they begin to be heard. Although frames continue to be inconsistently defined and theorized against the background of various paradigms, the view on frames has narrowed considerably. Already, subfields are being distinguished from framing research as related but different. The image of frames has been framed itself (D'Angelo, 2002; Iyengar, 2010; Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009).

Both developments have proven fruitful, to say the least: Taking their pictures of countless frames, researchers have catalogued various properties and capabilities, and the debate on which conditions allow frames to impress the most is well under way (Chong & Druckman, 2007c). Closely observing also the visitors marveling at framed images, they have begun to explain why and how frames unfold their powerful appeal (Nelson & Oxley, 1999; Price & Tewksbury, 1997). Supported by the fragile but growing agreement on the kinds of frames, experiences have been collated from a variety of exhibitions and made available to the field in a first wave of synoptic surveys (Iyengar, 2010; Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009). Drawing upon the available catalogues of frames and experiences, the multiparadigmatic research agenda begins to converge into a limited set of key approaches, tackling a range of commonly acknowledged quests.

However, the establishment and conventionalization of the field has come at a price. On the one hand, emerging conventions on what frames are not only paint a clearer image of the phenomenon under consideration, they also exclude related phenomena from the picture. Keen on getting a grip on the notoriously slippery concept, researchers have drawn some relatively clear-cut types of frames at the centre, pushing aside messier kinds: While message frames are prominently depicted at the core of the research field, frames in thought have been pushed close to the frame and the edge of the canvas (Berinsky & Kinder, 2006; B.T. Scheufele, 2004a). Discourse, culture, and understanding project into the picture but remain mostly outside (van Gorp, 2007). Knowledge,

schemata and attitudes appear blurred in the background, while situation cues, keyings and motivations are hidden below the picture frame, or were cut off when the image was framed. The image of frames is gaining depth and detail, but its scope is narrow.

Simultaneously, the pronounced interest in frames has in large parts crowded out those images that initially motivated the use of framing approaches. The concerns of (mostly political or sociological) research have been degraded to mere cases for the study of a communication phenomenon. In the pictures of documented and analyzed frames, mere stubs of social relevance remain visible – unfocused glimpses at the large old paintings of victorious election campaigners, mobilized publics or disengaged cynics (Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Iyengar, 1991). Research into framing has become an ends in itself. The question why frames matter, for whom, and how, remains unanswered in much recent theorizing.

Framing research has attracted many skilled and ingenious painters, coloring the picture with various paradigms, and adding detail and structure to the scene (D'Angelo, 2002; Entman, 1993). However, the rich picture squeezes into a tight frame that stands out clearly against the wall. Beyond the frame, several corners have fallen into neglect. This dissertation aims to extend the view onto frames, looking beyond the frame that conventionally delimits the research field. It expressly departs from a concern with the formation of social meaning, conceptualizing frames against this backdrop alongside several other, related concepts. Asking how frames contribute to people's ability to make sense of the world they live in, it develops several important links that embed frames within the wider context of social communication and comprehension. At the same time, this study hopes to convince the reader that this widening of scope does not have to come at the cost of conceptual blurriness that has long haunted framing research (Entman, 1993). It advances a conceptualization of frames that builds upon, but formalizes and further specifies existing definitions of frames. The formal structure of the advanced theory in particular allows an integration of related concepts in information processing within the same general framework. Unrolling the canvas tucked in underneath the tight frame of framing research, it provides a grid that holds existing frames of reference in their places while their boundaries are transgressed.

1.1. Research interest

The research interest of this dissertation can be framed in multiple ways. Looking at the grand picture, the overarching question is how people manage to draw upon frames for making complex information useful for their understandings (Berinsky & Kinder, 2006; Graber, 1988; Neuman *et al.*, 1992). Starting from the recognition that frames play a crucial role in structuring information and relating it to relevant contexts, this dissertation develops and tests theoretical expectations about the use of communication frames in the acquisition of knowledge. The theoretical model developed below rests, chiefly, on four main propositions that will be tested subsequently: First, this thesis proposes that the function that frames perform in a person's reasoning is first and foremost a semantic function and consists in the formation of coherence among selected propositions. Second, it proposes that people form frames in response to internal or external stimuli, but the information used for formation is mostly drawn from memory. Third, this thesis

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argues that people are usually capable of forming many different frames to contextualize the same information, and therefore able to select frames that support their prior ideas and goals. Fourth and finally, the above three propositions taken together imply that frames enable people to form interpretations and judgments by discriminating relevant from peripheral information, and integrating it into larger, coherent accounts. Frames, hence, perform a crucial function for people's attempts to make sense of the world, allowing the formation of coherent meaning from disparate information. From this broad, overarching perspective, this study integrates knowledge from framing effects research with the relevant theories of semantic meaning construction, cognitive structure and knowledge organization. It aims to provide a theory of how processed frames can feed into schematic knowledge, and enable people to form reasoned, personalized understandings.

At the same time, this study pursues a range of more specific research interests which support the overarching ambition. The first important building brick concerns the cognitive processes underlying the acquisition of frames. While several process models of framing have been advanced in the literature, these stand mostly apart and make different predictions about how frames are integrated into a person's knowledge (Nelson & Oxley, 1999; Price & Tewksbury, 1997; Slothuus, 2008). Aiming to resolve these inconsistencies, this dissertation develops an integrated process model which locates the existing approaches as subsequent stages within frame processing. Testing the derived predictions, this study thus provides a more detailed view at the cognitive responses to framed messages, and assesses the relative importance of the integrated subprocesses (Greenwald, 1968).

The second building brick concerns the uses that people make of frame structures acquired and integrated into their knowledge. While it has recurrently been stated that frames enable people to flexibly apply their knowledge to make sense of their worlds, there is hardly any empirical research available on the subject matter (Druckman, 2001; Graber, 1988; Neuman *et al.*, 1992). In particular, the role of frames for the integration of diverse, possibly contradictory considerations lies at the heart of this study. Thus, the present dissertation aims to provide answers to the question whether, how, and how well frames enable people to flexibly handle the information available to them.

A third important brick concerns the comparative structures of information in communication, cognitive storage, and ongoing information processing (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983). Referring to the distinction between frames in communication and in thought (Berinsky & Kinder, 2006; B.T. Scheufele, 2004a), it investigates to what degree these aggregate states of frames share comparable structures or deviate systematically from one another. It also relates either to the third advanced variety – frames in culture (B.T. Scheufele, 2004a; van Gorp, 2007) – and sketches the theoretical grounds on which the differences can be conceptualized.

These three concerns are integrated on three levels. Theoretically, they form the main building bricks that support the overarching research question stated above. Formally, they refer to a common conceptual metaphor that understands information as a network of propositions (Collins & Loftus, 1975; Kintsch, 1998; Tourangeau & Rasinski, 1988). This conceptualization is referred to throughout this study and serves as a grid enabling the integration of various theoretical contributions from different disciplines. Simultaneously, this conceptual grid is matched, third, by a methodological approach

based on a semantic network representation of the empirically recorded information (Carley & Kaufer, 1993; van Atteveldt, 2008). This highly flexible data structure thus both facilitates the integration of different research designs and measurement strategies and supports a close correspondence between theoretical modeling and empirical operationalization. A final aim of the present dissertation thus consists in the better integration of related theoretical approaches and empirical strategies. Countering the widely criticized tendency to collapse differentiated concepts into compound measures and differentiated data into aggregate concepts (Haste, 1992; Reese, 2007), this approach allows a rigorous analysis of both micro and macro level patterns in information. This dissertation thus hopes to contribute to a sharpening of both conceptual definitions and their corresponding operationalizations, increasing flexibility and precision in the study of frames.

1.2. Plan of the study

This dissertation consists of three empirical studies tied together by a common theoretical framework and a comparative analysis of the data gathered in two of the studies. Chapter II sketches a theory of semantically context-dependent information acquisition in three main steps, drawing upon psychological, linguistic, and communication research as its three main foundations: First, information is described as semantically dependent on other information that is seen as related to it, based on psycholinguistic theories of meaning in language (Carley & Kaufer, 1993; van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983). Second, drawing upon research in discourse linguistics and journalism research in communications, the structure of information content in communicated messages is determined (Grice, 1975; B.T. Scheufele, 2006; van Dijk, 1985). Analogously, third, psychological theories of schematic memory will be drawn upon for the conceptualization of the cognitive storage of information (Axelrod, 1973; Kuklinski, Luskin, & Bolland, 1992). Based on these steps, the processes governing the processing and acquisition of information and the construction of coherence among gathered information will be modelled, drawing upon research in research in communication science and political psychology. Throughout these steps, the concept of frames plays a central role in relating the theoretical building blocks to one another. In addition, the semantic network theory of information serves as a conceptual metaphor and operational data structure throughout the entire study.

Based on the theoretical framework, specific predictions will be derived regarding the organization of information in communicated messages and semantic memory, as well as the processing of message-provided information in memory. These propositions are tested empirically in the three studies constituting the subsequent chapters, making use of a case that naturally constrained the range of external influences interfering with the acquisition of information from public communication: As spelled out in chapter III, the Dutch referendum on the European Constitution provides an unusually well-delimited case for the study of discourse based information acquisition in a natural setting. Assessing Dutch voters' processing of information related to European politics, and investigating both the structure of information provided to them and the knowledge derived from it, the main propositions of the developed theory can be tested.

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As a first step, the propositions regarding the mechanics of information processing are tested in chapter IV. Based on an online framing experiment recording cognitive responses to provided communication frames, the theoretical assumptions are validated. The two other studies assess the context structures of information on the EU Constitution in publicly proliferated messages and in the understanding acquired by Dutch voters: Chapter V investigates which frames have been made available to the Dutch public over the duration of public discourse on the EU constitution. It presents the results of a fine grained content analysis of Dutch news coverage, televised talk shows and political groups' campaign activities, forming semantic network representations of the introduced information contexts. In close analogy to this, the study presented in chapter VI analyzes the frames and context associations acquired by Dutch voters at the end of the public debate on the EU constitution. Based on the data gathered in these two studies, it is subsequently possible to conduct a detailed comparative analysis of the provided and acquired frames. Chapter VII presents the results of this analysis and discusses the implications of detected similarities and dissimilarities for the acquisition processes governing people's use of proliferated frames. Chapter VIII, finally, revisits the main findings from the empirical chapters and discusses their relevance in light of the proposed theoretical framework. The technical annex in chapter IX contains sample descriptions, coding instructions and interviewer guides. This chapter also includes the complete results tables where truncated tables have been presented throughout the study.¹

¹ Most chapters included in this dissertation are partly based on a range of conference papers and one journal publication: The study reported in chapter IV has been presented in two conference papers at the International Communication Association's (ICA) Annual Conferences in Montreal, Canada and Chicago, IL, respectively (Baden, C. (2008). *Semantic association and weighted consideration: How framing shifts people's information bases in opinion formation*. Presented at the 58th ICA Annual Conference, Montreal, Canada, & Baden, C. (2009). *Shifting the valence balance: Resonance, resistance and countervalue of cognitive responses to communication frames*. Presented at the 59th ICA Annual Conference, Chicago, IL). Chapter V is partly based on a conference paper presented at the 2010 ICA Annual Conference in Singapore (Baden, C. (2010). *Contextualizing frames in political discourse: Using semantic network analysis to investigate political parties' framing strategies in the Dutch EU referendum campaign*. Presented at the 60th ICA Annual Conference, Singapore). Chapter VI unites parts from one article co-authored by Claes de Vreese (Baden, C., & de Vreese, C. H. (2008). *Making sense: A reconstruction of people's understandings of the European constitutional referendum in the Netherlands*. *Communications*, 33, 117-146), and another ICA conference paper (Baden, C. (2008). *Combining multiple considerations: Voters' uses of campaign cues, schematic knowledge, and heuristic reasoning in the Dutch EU constitutional referendum*. Presented at the 58th ICA Annual Conference, Montreal, Canada). The comparative analysis in chapter VII draws upon one paper presented at the 2009 Etmaal van de Communicatiewetenschap in Nijmegen (Baden, C. (2009). *Not bits but nets of information: Towards a methodology for assessing the acquisition of structural knowledge from media discourse*. Presented at the Etmaal van de Communicatiewetenschap, Nijmegen, Netherlands), as well as a final ICA conference paper (Baden, C. (2010). *Communicative and cognitive meaning: Using semantic network analysis for comparing public discourse and personal understandings of EU politics*. Presented at the 60th ICA Annual Conference, Singapore). The other chapters – notably, the theory chapter II and the case description presented in chapter III – include fragments and ideas from multiple of the named papers. All chapters have been thoroughly revised and, for most parts, rewritten for this dissertation. Except for the article co-authored by my supervisor Claes H. de Vreese, all papers are single-authored by me.