ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Thoughts on Agenda Setting, Framing, and Priming

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This article discusses similarities and differences between "second-level" agenda setting and framing, and between priming and agenda setting. It presents data on the number of studies of agenda setting, framing, and priming indexed by Communication Abstract *from 1971 to 2005, and it offers some conclusions about the cognitive processes involved in agenda setting, priming and framing.*

As someone who has worked on studies of media agenda setting since the 1972 U.S. presidential election (Weaver, 1977; Weaver, McCombs, & Spellman, 1975), I am more familiar with the theoretical debates and empirical findings of this branch of media research than with theories and research focusing on framing or priming. Nevertheless, I see these areas of communication research as interconnected and as involving some similar, although not identical, cognitive processes and effects. As I have written before (Weaver, 1997–1998, p. 3), "focusing on framing does not necessarily mean discarding the findings of much agenda-setting research that is more concerned with which issues are emphasized (or *what* is covered) than *how* such issues are reported and discussed."

Whereas the "first level" of agenda setting is focused on the relative salience (usually operationally defined as perceived importance) of issues or subjects, the "second level" examines the relative salience of attributes of issues, as McCombs (2005) and Ghanem (1997) have described in detail. These agendas of attributes have been called "the second level" of agenda setting to distinguish them from the first level that has traditionally focused on issues (objects), although the term "level" implies that attributes are more specific than objects, which is not always the case. The perspectives and frames that journalists employ draw attention to certain attributes of the objects of news coverage, as well as to the objects themselves, and some of these perspectives can be very general (e.g., a "Cold War" frame).

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Framing and agenda setting

Tankard, Hendrickson, Silberman, Bliss, and Ghanem (1991, p. 3) have described a media frame as "the central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration." Entman (1993, p. 52) argues that "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." (italics in original). McCombs (1997, p. 37) has suggested that in the language of the second level of agenda setting, "framing is the selection of a restricted number of thematically related attributes for inclusion on the media agenda when a particular object is discussed." He argues that there are many other agendas of attributes besides aspects of issues and traits of political candidates, and a good theoretical map is needed to bring some order to the vastly different kinds of frames discussed in various studies.

Not all scholars agree that second-level agenda setting is equivalent to framing, at least not to more abstract, or macrolevel, framing. Gamson (1992) has conceived of framing in terms of a "signature matrix" that includes various condensing symbols (catchphrases, taglines, exemplars, metaphors, depictions, visual images) and reasoning devices (causes and consequences, appeals to principles or moral claims). Some would argue that second-level agenda setting is more similar to the first part of this matrix than to the second, because it is easier to think of condensing symbols as attributes of a given object but more difficult to think of reasoning devices as attributes (Weaver, McCombs, & Shaw, 2004).

In this present issue of the *Journal of Communication*, the authors employ a number of definitions of framing, including problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendations, as well as key themes, phrases, and words. The article on the constructionist approach to framing argues that "framing incorporates a wider range of factors than priming and agenda setting, which are both cognitive concepts," and that "frames are tied in with culture as a macrosocietal structure."

Whatever definitions of framing are used, and there do seem to be many more than for agenda setting or priming, it is clear that this term has become much more common in communication research articles than either agenda setting or priming in the past decade, rising from 2 articles indexed in *Communication Abstracts* in 1976–1980 (as compared with 15 on agenda setting) to 76 in 1996–2000 and 165 in the 2001–2005 period (see Figure 1). In contrast, agenda-setting articles increased steadily from 1971–1975 to 1991–1995 (from 4 to 40), then dropped a bit from 1996 to 2000, and went back to slightly above 40 in the 2001–2005 period. Articles focusing on priming in the communication journals indexed by *Communication Abstracts* were nonexistent from 1971 to 1985, very few from 1986 to 1995 (5), but became a bit more frequent in the last half of the 1990s (14) and the first half of the 2000 decade (25). Overall, then, there is a pattern of dramatic growth in
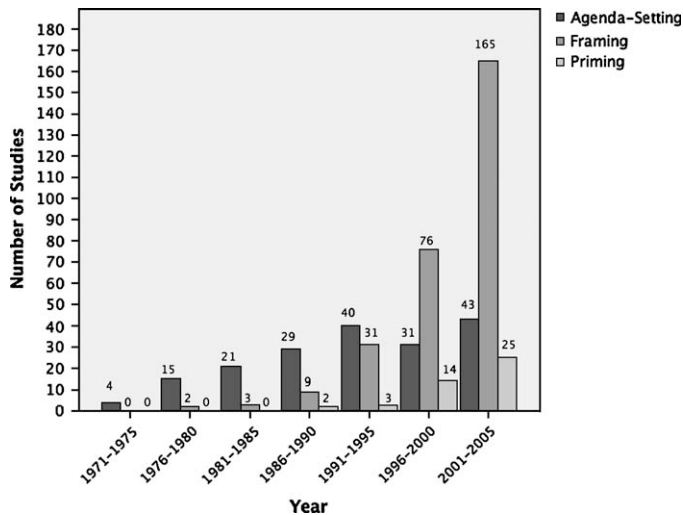
Figure 1 Number of studies of agenda setting, framing, and priming, 1971–2005.
Note: These data were complied from *Communication Abstracts* Basic Search with "agenda setting," "framing," and "priming" as key words "anywhere in record," respectively. The first research article using the term "framing" appeared in 1980 in *Journalism Quarterly*, and the first article using the term "priming" appeared in 1986 in *Discourse Processes*.

framing studies from the first half of the 1990s to the present, of some modest growth in priming studies, and a leveling off of agenda-setting studies.

It is not clear why framing has become so much more popular with communication scholars than either agenda setting or priming in the past 10 years, but it may have something to do with the ambiguity or the comprehensive nature of the term. "Frame" can be applied to many different aspects of messages and to many different types of messages. It can also be studied by means of systematic content analysis or more interpretive textual analysis alone, although many of the articles in this issue of *Journal of Communication* attempt to analyze the relationships between media frames and audience frames, a more theoretically fruitful approach to studying framing.

But whether framing is more or less similar to second-level agenda setting depends very much on how framing is defined, as suggested earlier. For example, a study by de Vreese, Peter, and Semetko (2001) concerns the framing in news reports of the introduction of the Euro monetary unit. This study defines frames in terms of amount of conflict over the introduction of the Euro and the economic consequences of adopting it in various countries. Amount of conflict seems to fit the dictionary definition of an attribute (an inherent characteristic or quality), whereas economic consequences seem to go beyond what would usually be considered an attribute of an issue.

Another example by Callaghan and Schnell (2001) deals with how the news media framed elite policy discourse concerning the issue of gun control. These scholars

defined frames as stated or implied arguments. Examples included "guns deter crime," "guns don't kill, people do," and "there is a constitutional right to bear arms." These arguments seem to go beyond the commonly held definition of attribute because they are more than just characteristics or qualities of the issue.

Priming and agenda setting

A number of scholars have become interested in the effects of media agenda setting on public opinion and government policy. The focus on the consequences of agenda setting for public opinion (sometimes labeled "priming") can be traced back at least to Weaver, McCombs, and Spellman (1975, p. 471), who speculated in their study of the effects of Watergate news coverage that the media may suggest which issues to use in evaluating political actors, but who did not use the term priming to describe this process.

Their speculation was supported a decade later when Iyengar and Kinder (1987), in controlled field experiments, linked television agenda-setting effects to evaluations of the U.S. president in a demonstration of what some cognitive psychologists have called priming—making certain issues or attributes more salient and more likely to be accessed in forming opinions. Weaver (1991) also found that increased concern over the federal budget deficit was linked to increased knowledge of the possible causes and solutions of this problem, stronger and more polarized opinions about it, and more likelihood of engaging in some form of political behavior regarding the issue, even after controlling for various demographic and media-use measures.

Willnat (1997, p. 53) has argued that the theoretical explanations for these correlations, especially between agenda setting and behavior, have not been well developed, but the alliance of priming and agenda setting has strengthened the theoretical base of agenda-setting effects by providing "a better understanding of how the mass media not only tell us 'what to think about' but also 'what to think' " (Cohen, 1963). Scheufele (2000) asserts that the theoretical premises of agenda setting and framing are different—that agenda setting (and priming) rely on the theory of attitude accessibility by increasing the salience of issues and thus the ease with which they can be retrieved from memory when making political judgments, whereas framing is based on prospect theory that assumes that subtle changes in the description of a situation invoke interpretive schemas that influence the interpretation of incoming information rather than making certain aspects of the issue more salient.

Conclusions

There are similarities between second-level agenda setting and framing, even if they are not identical processes. Both are more concerned with *how* issues or other objects (people, groups, organizations, countries, etc.) are depicted in the media than with *which* issues or objects are more or less prominently reported. Both focus on the

most salient or prominent aspects or themes or descriptions of the objects of interest. Both are concerned with ways of thinking rather than objects of thinking. But framing does seem to include a broader range of cognitive processes—such as moral evaluations, causal reasoning, appeals to principles, and recommendations for treatment of problems—than does second-level agenda setting (the salience of attributes of an object).

It seems likely that agenda setting and priming are based on more similar cognitive processes, as Scheufele (2000) has suggested, because both are salience based, although agenda setting seems to be more than just a matter of accessibility, as Takeshita (2006) has argued and as studies using the concept of need for orientation (Matthes, 2006; Weaver, 1977, 1991) have found (perceived relevance and uncertainty affect the degree of agenda setting). Not all persons are equally affected by the same amount and prominence of media coverage, and not all easily accessible information is considered important.

As Takeshita (2006, p. 277) points out, "salience is a word with two meanings." The first one is the idea of perceived importance, whereas the second one ("top of mind") is closer to the idea of accessibility. The two meanings do seem to be correlated, but not identical, as illustrated by a study by Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley (1997) that concluded that their measure of perceived importance (a self-report question) was more theoretically valuable than their measure of accessibility (response time) because perceived importance was found to mediate the subsequent effect of framing while accessibility did not.

To sum up, there are similarities and connections between agenda setting, priming, and framing, but they are not identical approaches. Framing studies have far outstripped both agenda setting and priming studies in popularity during the past decade, but framing seems to be the least well defined of the three, conceptually or operationally. Future studies should make renewed efforts to define frames and framing more clearly, and to clarify the similarities and differences—and explore the relationships—between framing and agenda setting, and between framing and priming. A number of the articles in this issue of *Journal of Communication* are beginning to do this, which is a promising sign of things to come.

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