

Porous frontiers: priming as an extension of agenda setting and framing as a complementary approach

Fronteiras porosas: priming como extensão da agenda setting e o framing como uma abordagem complementar

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Abstract

Agenda setting and priming both work under the premise that media affect audience evaluations by influencing the likelihood of some issues rather than other coming to mind. Framing, in turn, rests on the idea that, by representing the world in a certain way, media influence people to think about the world in particular ways. Agenda setting, priming and framing all suggest that media messages participate in the formation of the public knowledge and that knowledge is activated and used in politically relevant decisions.

This paper provides a concise, accessible and clear overall perspective on these three theories and aims to provide theoretical and methodological clarifications that may lead to a better accommodation of these three ways of conceptualizing media influence on public opinion.

The first part characterizes and elucidates on the meaning of priming and framing as traditionally being seen as an extension and a sub-species of agenda setting. It argues that although priming may be conceived as an extension of agenda setting, framing is not a sub species of agenda setting. In the second part, it contends that agenda setting and framing constitute different strands of research – namely,

media effects based on an accessibility model and on a social constructivist, applicability model – and that, as such, they develop themselves autonomously and independently, even if they complement each other.

Keywords: Agenda setting; media priming; framing; constructivist approach to framing; media effects.

Resumo

A *agenda setting* e o *priming* existem sob a premissa de que os *media* afetam as avaliações do público influenciando a probabilidade de algumas questões virem à mente e não outras. O *framing*, por seu turno, baseia-se na ideia de que, ao representar o mundo de uma certa maneira, os *media* influenciam as pessoas a pensar sobre o mundo de modos particulares. A *agenda setting*, o *priming* e o *framing* sugerem, pois, que as mensagens dos meios de comunicação participam na formação do conhecimento público e que o conhecimento é ativado e utilizado em decisões politicamente relevantes.

Este artigo fornece uma perspectiva geral concisa, acessível e clara sobre essas três teorias e tem como objetivo proceder a

esclarecimentos teóricos e metodológicos que podem levar a uma melhor acomodação dessas três maneiras de compreender a influência dos *media* na opinião pública. Na primeira parte, caracteriza-se e elucidase o significado de priming e framing como uma extensão e uma subespécie da *agenda setting*. Argumenta-se que, embora o priming possa ser concebido como uma extensão da *agenda setting*, o *framing* não é uma subespécie da *agenda setting*. Na segunda parte, afirma-se que a *agenda setting* e o *framing* constituem diferentes vertentes de pesquisa – este baseado no modelo de acessibilidade dos efeitos dos *media* e no modelo de aplicabilidade e construtivismo social – e que, como tal, eles se desenvolvem em autonomia e independência, ainda que sejam complementares entre si.

Palavras-chave: *Agenda setting*; *media priming*; *framing*; abordagem construtivista do *framing*; efeitos dos *media*.

Introduction

The transformations of media's role on society have sparked a rich and stimulating controversy regarding the influence of mass media on public opinion. Since the two-step flow of communication model of communication, discernible effects were considered minimal being filtered through interpersonal interaction and other social forces (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). In fact, a massive, direct persuasive of media effect may even be unlikely because audiences selectively avoid contrary information, they suffer from an information overload and choose their media interest in a strong competition media environment (McGuire, 1986). Bennett & Iyengar (2008, p. 709) even claimed we are now entering a "new era of minimal effects" (cf. Shehata & Strömbäck, 2013).

The turn from studying attitudinal effects of media to examining cognitive effects reflected a major shift of research in social psychology and communication studies, focusing in indirect effects such as changes in voter preference during a political campaign (Price & Tewksbury, 1997, p. 175). The concern about the persua-

sive impact of mass media was, thus, redirected to a cognitive perspective emphasizing information-processing.

Emblematic of the cognitive effects of mass-media is Agenda-Setting research, a paradigm of research on public opinion (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p. 10) that establishes a connection between the importance of issues by public opinion and the selective coverage of particular public problems by mass media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Authors such as Robert E. Park, Walter Lippman or Bernard Cohen have certainly opened the path for the emergence of Agenda-Setting research that Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972) inaugurated with their Chapel Hill study.

Ever since, agenda-setting scientific papers increased steadily from 1972 to 1995, then dropped slightly until 2000, from which there is again a rising trend (Weaver, 2007, p. 143). At the same time, priming articles were almost inexistent in that period and have become far more frequent in the 2000 decade (*ibidem*). It is also evident that framing has become much more common in communication research articles than agenda setting or

priming (Weaver, 2007, p. 144). There is a dramatic growth of framing studies (including media and newspaper's framing process) with a modest growth in priming studies and a levelling off of agenda setting research (*idem*).

Since agenda setting, priming – coming from the cognitive psychology- and framing all describe aspects of mass media's cognitive effects, these theories tended to be assimilated together, more exactly, priming and framing have been integrated to agenda setting theory (McCombs, 2004, p. 57; Dearing & Rogers, 1996, pp. 62-67; Diaz, 2004, p. 66). It is well known agenda setting refers to the strong correlation between the emphasis mass media place in certain issues and the importance attributed to these issues by audiences (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Priming, by its turn, refers to the "changes in the standards that people use to make political evaluations" (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987, p. 63) and occurs when news content suggests to news audiences specific issues as benchmarks for evaluating the performance of leaders and Government. Framing, in its turn, states that how an issue is characterized by

mass media can have a strong influence on how it is understood by audiences (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 11). While agenda setting focuses in which topics or issues are selected for coverage by news media, and priming focuses on the way mass media audiences use those selected issues to evaluate political performance, framing is particularly concerned with the ways public problems are presented and formulated for media audiences.

What joins all three approaches under a cognitive effects model of mass media is the basic interest in the ability of media messages to alter patterns of knowledge activation (Price & Tewksbury, 1997, p. 184). Agenda setting and priming work both under the notion that media selection affects audience evaluations by influencing the likelihood of some issues coming into mind, thus, affecting audience's judgement of issue importance of political actors. And framing rests in the idea that, by representing the world in a certain way, media influence people to think about the world in particular ways. Agenda setting, priming and framing all suggest media messages participate in the formation of the pub-

lic knowledge and that knowledge is activated and used on politically relevant decisions.

Therefore, agenda setting, priming and framing seem to describe similar phenomena (Chernov & McCombs, 2019). More importantly, McCombs (2014, p. 101) considers priming and framing an extension of agenda setting. And Comstock & Scharner (1999) remark that, conceptually, priming and framing are subspecies of agenda setting effects.

This paper dwells on the meaning of considering similar phenomena like priming and framing as extension or subspecies of agenda setting and elucidates the frontiers between these (sometimes) overlapped notions. It shares the view posited by Scheufele (2000) stating that attempts to combine these three concepts under the same theoretical framework are bound to failure. And advocates that, although the third-level of agenda-setting is quite analogous to priming, agenda setting and priming fundamentally differ, conceptually and methodologically, from framing.

The paper provides a concise, accessible and clear overall on these

three theories and it aims to make conceptual clarifications that may lead us to a better accommodation of these three media impacts on public opinion, specifically to tell apart agenda setting and priming as media effects models from framing as a cultural construction of the social world.

In the first part, it characterizes and elucidates the meaning of priming and framing as being an extension and a sub-species of agenda setting. It argues that although priming may be conceived as an extension of agenda setting, framing is not a sub species of agenda-setting. In the second part, it contends that agenda setting and framing constitute different strands of research – namely, media effects accessibility model and a social construction, applicability model – and that, as such, they develop themselves in autonomy and independence, even if they complement each other.

Agenda-Setting: a causal theory of indirect media effects

The agenda setting function of mass media offers an understanding

of the shaping of public opinion in modern, democratic societies through the correlation between the selection media operate about certain issues and those issues and problems public opinion finds most relevant. Agenda setting is at the intersection of mass communication research and political science providing a powerful framework to conceive the influence of mass media on public policy.

Salience is its key concept describing the degree to which an issue is perceived as important. The heart of agenda setting lies at the transfer of salience from the media agenda to the public agenda (McCombs, 2004, p. 5). Instead of focusing in positive or negative attitudes, agenda setting research focuses in how the salience of an issue changes and determines public problems as issues worth to think about. Another key concept is individual's need for orientation defined according to two lower-order concepts, relevance and uncertainty (McCombs, 2004, p. 64). Where relevance is low to the individual (or non-existent), the need for orientation is also low while under conditions of high relevance and low uncertainty,

the need for orientation is moderate (McCombs, 2004, p. 65).

These are its main assumptions.

First, agenda setting is a causal theory demonstrated a significant degree of correlation between media agenda (the presumed cause) and public agenda (its effect). This strong causal effect is found in three instances: one, in the transfer of salience from the media to the public agenda; two, in the correlation between the need for orientation about political affairs and the use of mass media for political information (Weaver *et al.*, 1975, p. 465); three, causality is stated in the fact that the increased prominence of a topic in mass media, causes the salience of a topic to increase in people's minds (Weaver *et al.*, 1975, p. 460). It is clear that agenda setting function of mass communication cannot be applied equally to all persons since it is dependent on the psychological notion of "need for orientation". Nevertheless, a variety of studies support the initial claim of McCombs and Shaw (1972) that individuals learn how much importance to attach to a given issue from the amount of information in a news story.

Second, agenda setting strong causal effect is also dependent on time-order since the cause must precede the effect. This means that any measured public concern about the issues of the moment has to be juxtaposed with the concern of news media about those issues in the preceding weeks (McCombs, 2004, p. 15; Atkinson, Lovett & Baumgartner, 2014; Ninkovic-Slavnic, 2016).

Third, the agenda setting causality is demonstrated by the need of results to be shown by empirical validation. Empirical experiments involving polls have the task to prove the functional relationship between the content of the media agenda and the response of the public to that agenda (McCombs, 2004, p. 16).

However, this strong causality in agenda setting theory refers to an indirect effect ("what to think about") instead a direct media effect ("what to think"). It represents an answer and overtaking of previous models of direct media effects putting researchers investigating how media news coverage affected an issue's salience – and by extension the salience of public opinion – without presupposing that media

tell people what to think. Instead, indirect causal effects have to do with influences on individual attitudes.

It is also important to highlight that agenda setting is an incremental process based on the cumulative effect of media messages. Mass media convey the priority (salience) of an issue principally through repetition (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p. 62). It is the relentless work of media on the reproduction of those issues that permits the accumulated impact enabling those issues to affect public agenda. Therefore, agenda setting postulated a similarity between the intensity, or amount of media coverage to the degree of consensus about an issue's priority on public agenda. Media agenda, thus, influences public agenda through a gradual process that builds up an issue in the public agenda.

This takes us to other key aspect of agenda setting: the distinction between "agenda setting" and "agenda building".

The latter designates "a macro-level studies involving reciprocity and structural interdependencies among public policymakers, mass media, and mass publics" (Denham, 2010,

p. 317). Since Elder & Cobb's (1971) pioneering paper, agenda building has to do the negotiation of interest by social groups competing for the attention of public officials and policy agendas. They have identified three main steps in the agenda building process: issue creation, issue expansion and agenda entrance (Elder & Cobb, 1972).

Despite the above distinction on agenda setting and agenda building, there is, according to McCombs (2004, p. 143) no fundamental difference between the two. Since agenda setting defines the transference of salience between agendas, whatever the domain or setting, there is no point in talking in agenda building as something radically different from agenda setting. Even if it concerns the transfer of salience from the public agenda into policy agenda, this process is still an agenda setting process. The dominant domain of agenda setting is political communication and public issues, but it can still be studied and observed in many settings. The newsmedia-public connection is not the only one possible so agenda building and agenda setting designate the very same process even if in different settings: agenda setting

concerns the transfer of issue's salience from the media agenda into the public agenda, while agenda building accounts for the transfer of issue's salience between public agenda and policy agenda (Neuman, Guggenheim, Jang & Be, 2014).

Priming as Extension of Agenda Setting: from distinction to coincidence

Priming was first introduced in Cognitive Psychology and describes a condition where exposure to one stimulus influences a response to a subsequent stimulus without conscious control or intention. For example, the word "Journalist" is recognized quicker following the word "Media" than the word "Building". It is defined as "the effects of a prior context on the interpretation and retrieval of information" (Fiske & Taylor, 1984, p. 231). Priming has its origins in the psychological network models of memory, according to which information is stored in memory as nodes (concepts) that are connected to one another via associative pathways. The greater the distance between the nodes, the less related

they are. When a node is activated it involves the activation of other nodes depending how accessible they are in memory. Thus, concepts are primed for application to another stimulus.

Priming entered the study of political communication by the hand of Iyenga & Kinder (1987) who characterized the media-priming process in two moments. First, messages received through media activate preexisting associated knowledge in individuals. This activation makes such message (or cognitive unit) more accessible so that the individual is more likely to use it in interpreting and evaluating subsequent stimulus (the attitude object). A media priming effect occurs only if the individual (receiving the media message) applies the primed – more accessible concept – to a target object. For example, when citizens are primed by news media stories about the issue of national defense, they tended to judge their president by how well they feel he has provided national defense (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p. 63).

Priming is closely related to agenda-setting because of two main reasons.

By one hand, both media effects are grounded in mnemonic models of information-processing and assume that individuals form attitudes based on considerations that are most salient – *ergo* more accessible- when deciding about and evaluating issues. We can observe in both agenda setting and media priming effects the primacy of the selective attention of individuals: given the huge amount of information, individuals routinely draw upon those parcels of information that are particularly salient at a given time (Moy *et al.*, 2016, p. 5).

By other hand, priming is essentially an outgrowth of the media effects process initiated by agenda setting (Brosius, 1994, *apud* Moy *et al.*, 2016, p. 5). This is clear when McCombs (2004, p. 98) considers priming as “the link between object salience on the public agenda and the direction of opinion”. To be more precise, priming is the link between agenda-setting effects (resulting in the salience of certain issues among the public) and the subsequent expression of opinions about specific public issues. That’s why priming may be considered a significant extension of agenda-setting

(McCombs, 2004, p. 101). By making issues more salient in people’s minds (agenda setting), mass media help render accessible considerations that will be taken into account when making political evaluations about candidates or issues (priming).

In order to better understand why priming has such a close association with agenda setting we must consider agenda setting’s level effects.

The first level of agenda-setting effects designates the traditional perspective (Wanta & Alkazemi, 2017) on agenda setting as the transference the salience of objects (issues, candidates, etc). The second level of agenda setting deals the transference of the salience of attributes between the media agenda and the public agenda and it is called attribute agenda setting.

Attribute, second level agenda setting helps to explain why priming is truly an outgrowth and extension of agenda setting. Media priming is, above all, about media making certain attributes more salient and more likely accessed than others while individuals form opinion and judgements. In this particular respect, attribute agenda setting and media priming start to co-

incide because in both cases we are dealing with a creation of effects based on the salience of attributes. While at the first level, object agenda setting media tell us what to think about, the inclusion of a second level, attribute agenda setting further suggests that the media not only tell us what to think about, but that they also tell us how to think about some objects in the way they set the public agenda according to some attributes. “It is the agenda of attributes that define an issue and, in some instances, tilt public opinion towards a particular perspective or preferred solution. Setting the agenda of attributes for an issue is the epitome of political power. Controlling the perspective of the political debate on any issue is the ultimate influence on public opinion” (McCombs, 2004, p. 51).

Agenda setting and priming, although being conceptually distinct theories, start to refer to the same cognitive, information- processing effects. They both deal with the salience of object’s attributes that guide individuals process of opinion. “Attribute priming” (Kim *et al.*, 2002, p. 11) is a good example. It refers to the influence of mass media on the public’s evaluation

of issues and argues that certain issues emphasized in the media will become key aspect on issue evaluation. Priming effects go beyond the mere attitude formation and can be subtler because of differences in the amount of coverage given to certain attributes of an issue. “Priming, based on attribute agenda-setting, is therefore a key process for decision making (...). The media play a key role in indirectly shaping public opinions” (Kim *et al.*, 2002, p. 21).

Still, it is the third level of agenda setting that is virtually identically to priming. At the first level of agenda setting, rank-orders of objects are compared. At the second level, rank-orders of attributes are compared. At the third level, rank-orders of relationships among elements of the media agenda and public agenda are compared. The third level of agenda setting deals with bundling an object with an attribute and make them salient in the public’s mind simultaneously (McCombs, 2004, p. 55).

The third level agenda setting entails a new approach borrowed from the associate network model of memory (Anderson, 1983) and the cognitive

network model (Santanen *et al.*, 2000) and asserts that an individual’s representation of objects and attributes is presented as a network-like structure where nodes are connected to numerous other nodes (Lei Guo & McCombs, 2012: 54; Vargo, Guo, McCombs & Shaw, 2014). Network agenda setting, is labelled as “the impact of the networked media agenda of objects or attributes on the networked public agenda of object or attribute salience” (McCombs *et al.*, 2014, p. 782).

Third level agenda setting is, therefore, named a “Network Agenda Setting Model” and hypothesizes that “the more likely the news media mention two elements in tandem, the greater change that the audience will perceive these two elements as interconnected” (Lei Guo & McCombs, 2012: 55). This means that audiences map out objects and attributes as network-like pictures according to the interrelationships among them (Vu, Guo & McCombs, 2014). A Network Agenda Setting Model (NAS) postulates the transfer of network relationships and clusters between agendas, this is, the news media transfer the salience of relationships among a set of elements

to the public. The third level of agenda setting focus on the transfer of the salience of entire networks of objects and attributes – not just the salience of discrete, isolated elements examined in the first two levels of agenda setting. It is precisely this networked transference that is supposed to pinpoint a more detailed map of the effects on public opinion (Zhuo, Chris & Anfan, 2019).

It is now clear how third level, network agenda setting is (dangerously we dare to say) begin to appear as priming. Just as priming designates an associative model of information processing, third level agenda setting is also a deep associative, network-based model of information processing. Just as priming works by rendering accessible some nodes over others, the third level agenda setting (Network Agenda Setting Model) emphasizes an associative network regarding a given topic (Lei Guo & McCombs, 2012, p. 57).

Agenda setting and priming are in serious risk of conceptual collision because the third level of agenda setting is styled nearly identically to priming. In fact, some models proposing to explain cognitive processes in me-

dia priming (Berkowitz, 1984; Price & Tewksbury, 1997) rely directly in network models of memory (Ewolden *et al.*, 2002, p. 109). So, if at the first level, agenda- setting and priming are related even if distinct theories on media effects, with the second and third levels of agenda setting these notions tend to overlap and describe very similar processes of shaping public opinion. In that case, agenda setting would be just an umbrella concept subsuming priming.

This has fundamental consequences on what to understand about the idea of priming to be an extension of agenda-setting. While priming is a refinement of object agenda setting (first level) in the sense that is complementary to it and remain a psychological theory on itself, when we consider attribute (second level) and network agenda setting (third level) the word “extension” is not understood as a complement or an addendum.

As agenda setting evolved into network models of memory, association and interconnectedness, priming is still an extension of agenda setting. But now extension points to almost a coincidence. Third level agenda set-

ting is so much related with priming that extension must be taken as an appendix, an important part of the theoretical body of agenda setting. So, as long as network, third level agenda setting, describes the transfer of relationships and clusters between agendas there is not so much distance to priming as a theory of activating and spreading nodes (concepts). They are not twin sisters, although they certainly live in same vicinity. Maybe we can talk about agenda setting and priming as “familiar strangers”.

And what about framing?

Framing as a subspecies of Agenda Setting

The concept of framing has today so many different uses and theoretical backgrounds that it has not a single definition that is agreed upon (Scheufele, 2008).

Entman (1993) considers it a “fractured paradigm” but this is not an absolute risk. On the contrary, this diversity makes framing a thriving concept with many applications making the media effects domain “a bridging concept” (Reese, 2007).

The most cited definition of framing belongs to Entman (1993, p. 52) who writes: “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”.

A frame could be a phrase, a metaphor, image or analogy and it is used basically to communicate the essence of an issue. According to Gamson & Modigliani (1987, p. 143), a news frame is “a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them. The frame suggests the controversy is about, the essence of an issue”.

So, a news frame has a selective function offering a given reading; it stresses some elements while pushes others to the background. It is a kind of an elusive but imposing interpretation about an issue, inclosing a particular problem or perspective. In a few words, framing consists in the subtle selection of certain aspects of an issue by the mass media making them more

important and, thus, emphasizing a particular cause of some phenomenon (Iyengar, 1991. p. 11). News frames studies concentrate in voter mobilization, vote choice, issue interpretation or understanding of political problems (Lecheler & De Vreese, 2019, p. 14).

The two key areas on framing research are *frame-building* (how frames emerge) and *frame-setting* (the interplay of frames and citizens). The former refers to the development of frames and their choice on news stories while the latter describes the complex process of frames consumption and (subsequent, consequent) adoption by citizens *via* mass media as a way to assess and apprehend a political issue.

These two stages in the framing process (Scheufele, 1999) are similar to other two stages of agenda setting (agenda building and agenda setting) influencing the view that agenda setting and framing, broadly speaking, involve an identical process because both agenda-setting and framing direct how individuals will evaluate the issues present in news media (Iyengar, 1991).

The most convincing argument

adopting the view that framing is a subspecies of agenda setting comes from the second-level, attribute agenda setting. In fact, to state that attribute agenda-setting makes particular traits more salient than others is not radically distinct (as it may seem) from asserting that framing is about the selection of some aspects of perceived reality. In both cases, there is a choice, made by news media, that directs individual’s understanding of the political problem they refer to. Indeed, attribute agenda setting and framing focus both on how the objects of attention of messages – such as issues or political figures are presented, and how certain details of these objects influence citizen’s thoughts and feelings about them. Like attribute agenda setting, framing assumes semantic differences in the description of a public issue that will possibly be interpreted differently by distinct audience members.

McCombs (2004, p. 59) argues that attributes and frames are synonymous, and in some cases even overlapping concepts. And Entman (1993, p. 53) relies on the agenda setting terminology to describe frames’ functioning in terms of salience: “Frames highlight

some bits of information about an item that is the subject of a communication, thereby elevating them in salience. The word *salience* itself needs to be defined: It means making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences” (*our emphasis*).

It seems that agenda setting and framing research are here exploring the same terrain: how mass media exert influence by representing an issue through particular attributes or frames that become more salient to citizens and, in this way, directing political understanding. So, attribute agenda setting, introduced in the 1990’s, resolved a gap that existed between object agenda setting (focusing on a set of issues) and framing (focusing examining the content substance or framing of an issue) (Takeshita, 2005, p. 280). It presupposes a non-differentiation between agenda setting (specifically, second-level, object agenda setting) and framing (Popkin, 1994) and it takes framing into the theory of media effects (Iyengar, 1991).

That’s why some authors “complaint” that agenda setting researchers, by extending the original notion

into a second level, are entering the realm of framing (Kosicki, 1993).

Was Framing framed by Agenda Setting? – a constructivist approach

The question that follows is to determine the conditions from which it is possible to distinguish agenda setting and framing: was framing “framed” to a sub-species and extension of agenda setting under a media effects theory?

In this case, talking about agenda setting and framing would be the same and framing would have reduced in its scope and theoretical capability. Or, alternatively, is framing something conceptually different from agenda setting?

For starters, agenda setting and framing emerge in fundamentally distinct theoretical and methodological backgrounds: while agenda setting comes from the media effects research, framing comes from a sociological background based on the work of Bateson (cf. Mendonça & Simões, 2012) and Goffman (1974) in which frames are powerful ways of organizing personal and collective experience en-

abling individuals to quickly identify and adequately react to a number potentially infinite events or situations. This simple fact may impel us to dismiss the coincidence between agenda setting and framing.

Concomitantly, we should acknowledge that framing is a metatheoretical perspective (Scheufele, 1999, p. 104). Although deeply embedded in the larger context of media effects research, framing needs to be differentiated from other closely associated concepts of mass media effects research inserting it in the general construction of social reality. Scheufele (1999), for example, by searching for a holistic approach, prefers to concentrate on a processual model of framing that examines frame building, frame setting, individual-level frame processes and feedback from individual-level framing to media framing.

Framing goes, also, beyond a media effects cognitive approach: it covers not only a cognitive dimension (by defining an issue and making a causal interpretation) but also the affective one (by providing a moral evaluation) and behavioral dimension (by claiming a treatment recommendation)

(Takeshita, 2005, p. 281). So, we can actually see that framing may be richer and step beyond a media effects research paradigm.

Indeed, framing is not even equivalent to the attributes agenda setting.

Gamson (1992) argues that framing is a kind of symbolic signature matrix (cf. Weaver, 2007, p. 143). This means that frames are not issues nor attributes but greater symbolic pillars, or leading perspectives, guiding the understanding of an issue. By recovering its sociological origins in Bateson and Goffman, we recognize that frames are meaning units that structure the perception of reality and mark out the adequate behaviors to adopt. Frames are, then, social angles and although they can be used strategically, this does not mean that frames equal strategies that aim to obtain a given effect. It was precisely this reduction of the concept of frame to a strategic use in order to attain certain tactical objectives that brought it closer to the mass communication research ultimately making framing as a subspecies or an equivalence of agenda setting (Mendonça & Simões, 2012, p. 195). At this light, frames tended to be thought

as discursive practices aiming to trigger some effects (Druckman & Nelson, 2003).

Following Van Gorp (2007, p. 73), I suggest to envisage framing under a cultural and constructionist approach in which it interacts with the larger society and entails a dynamic social process where reality is produced, reproduced and transformed by both media and audience, at the individual and collective levels.

Framing is a complex, multi-level process that describes an active interpretation and evaluation of the world. Every society relies on a cultural stock of negotiated frames that are a central part of its culture. Although culture refers to a set of persistent and publicly communicated set of beliefs, codes, myths, values, norms or frames shared collectively, frames are used by individuals as a repertoire of thinking and action. And even if they can suffer modifications over the course of time, frames are, nonetheless, rather stable since they are part of culture as schemata of organized knowledge.

Hence, frames are not cognitive aspects like issues are cognitive aspects of agenda setting and priming.

Frames exist in the connection between cognition and culture that are beyond a strictly individual formulation and a purely strategic usage. Issues and frames have to be seen independently given that the attribution of social meaning to media content are part of an interpretative process (Van Gorp, 2007, p. 63). Frames are cultural elements that form the base of social communication. They are, thus, basic mechanisms through which we communicate and socially produce and reproduce the world.

As part of culture, they necessarily get embedded in news media content and are negotiated with journalists, audience members but also social structures and institutional processes. As Scheufele (1999, p. 105) comments, framing is, within the realm of political communication, best operationalized in terms of social constructivism in which media actively set the frames of reference from which audiences integrate, interpret and infer. There is an active processing. Individuals use mass media content but since media messages are always incomplete (as a small part of a culture), citizens ponder on the information they get based

on preexisting meaning structures or schemas.

According to a constructivist view of framing and political communication, audience rely on parcels or versions of reality built from personal experience, social interaction and the interpreted selection operated by mass media (Scheufele, 1999, p. 105).

Agenda Setting and Priming, by one hand, and Framing, by other hand: different strands of Research

Following what has been said, one must not assimilate Agenda Setting to Framing. There are three main differences between, by one hand, agenda setting and priming, and by other hand, framing.

First, while agenda setting and priming are causal explanations of media effects (and statistically verified), framing is a deeply interactive, complex, communicative and symbolic process through which social reality is constructed. As such, the premises of framing are not formulated in terms of the effects of media content. In con-

trast, a constructivist perspective on framing takes media content as both a dependent and independent variable. “Media content is the result of journalistic routines and extra-media pressures, and it is actively processed by audience. As such, the framing concept uniquely combines elements that can generate strong media effects with factors that limit this impact” (Van Gorp, 2007, p. 70).

Also, the framing process is not unilateral nor linear. On the contrary, it is the result of the interaction of a myriad of aspects related to both journalistic production and audience reception. Further, frames are tied to cultural and social macrostructures that advise researchers to incorporate a wide range of factors besides cognitive ones (cf. agenda setting and priming). While these theories are mainly conceptualized as a matter of individual cognition, the cultural approach to framing assumes that frames are imbedded in larger structures and have cultural resonance.

Second, and following this line of thought, agenda setting and priming work at a psychological, individual level, while framing, on the other

hand, work on a more sociocultural level.

The difference between them is the difference between asking whether we think about an issue and how we conceive and apply different frames. The difference is between dealing with issues or actively constructing them in a unifying dynamic between audiences and media as well as cultural institutions and shared symbols.

Third, while agenda setting and priming are mostly concerned with issue’s salience and accessibility, framing, in contrast, does not equate frame to issues (Van Gorp, 2007, p. 70). In fact, one thing are issues, another thing are frames that guide individual and collective perception about them.

One issue can be object of several frames (i.e Great Britain’s Brexit from European Union can be framed as national salvation but also as a national disaster) and, at the same time, the very same frame can be used to cover diverse issues (i.e the frame of “catastrophe” can be used to describe a country’s economic policy but also to describe the lack of logistic means in a severe tempest situation). News media can take a particular issue from po-

litical agenda (Pascal & Anke, 2019) and, nevertheless, apply an opposing or contrasting frame to cover it. Agenda setting and priming research tend to deal with issue's as unitary research objects, and they are not so sensible and complex as framing taken as a constructivist approach.

The fundamental discrepancy between agenda setting and priming, by one hand, and framing, by other hand comes down to the difference between *accessibility* and *applicability* effects (Price & Tewksbury, 1997).

Agenda setting and priming are memory-based models of information processing. The temporal dimension of these theories clearly assumes that issues (some aspects of them) are more accessible and easier recallable. They describe a temporal intensity that helps bring to the forefront some issues that will influence the standards they use when deciding and evaluating political problems or candidates. Accessibility is, in simple terms, a function of "how much" or "how recently" audiences have been exposed to certain issues. Agenda setting and priming are accessibility models since are based on the ease these issues

can be retrieved from memory. They are bounded by the frequency with which issues are portrayed and their argument is essentially quantitative suggesting that greater frequency of exposure to issues makes them more likely to be uses by media audiences (Kim & Scheufele, 2002, p. 9).

In contrast, framing exemplifies an applicability-based model suggesting that media coverage influences audiences not through issues but primarily semantically, how an issue is presented and described. It is this discursive construction that evokes responses in media audiences in which frames will possibly be interpreted differently by different audience members. There is no direct, strong effect because frames are perspectives that are culturally and socially entrenched.

So, framing is a theory better equipped to answer those voices that naively equated media effects to almost mindless, mechanical or response-based effects. That is not the case with framing. For example, a news message may suggest a connection between taxes policy and sugared beverage consumption and be present through a simple frame. Yet, the

framing influence would be different according to media audiences that favor the sugar industry or that favor healthy food. It is the dialectical nature of frames (socially available but individually negotiated) that prevent them to describe a simple and automated reply by individuals to media messages.

Yet, accessibility and applicability models are not completely isolated from one another (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 16) since a frame will be more likely activated when it is accessible.

For example, framing financial bankruptcy as an economic crisis will be more probable to guide a public evaluation if the issue is constantly repeated and the same frame applied in other issues (i.e. The death of football club's owner as a football club's crisis). Likewise, an inapplicable frame is unlikely to be used, not matter how accessible it may be (i.e framing a singer's stage fall as a personal crisis, even this frame is one of the most frequent in today's mass media).

So, instead of endorsing the view that assimilates priming and framing to agenda setting, it is better to en-

visage framing as an independent research strand: a general theory based on the operation and outcomes of a particular system of thought and action (Entman, 1993, p. 56).

More than trying to fit in framing and agenda setting (and specifically inserting framing in the second level, attribute agenda setting), it seems more plausible to consider framing as research approach of its own with similar benefits to the study of political communication and public opinion formation.

Framing is not a pass-partout concept (Van Gorp, 2007, p. 60) but, inspired by a socio-cultural perspective, it is more than a pure model of media effects. It is a research strand parallel to agenda setting that enlightens another kind of cognitive influence on media audiences.

Conclusion

Was Framing framed by Agenda Setting?

By posing agenda setting (and priming as its extension) and framing as different approaches of research the answer is now perfectly clear.

Yes, at least a parcel of framing research tended to be assimilated to a media effect in the same way of agenda setting (cf. Druckman & Nelson, 2003). Nevertheless, a cultural approach to social construction carried on framing expands its theoretical scope (and domains of application) and prevents it to be reduced to a merely, more or less, mechanical effect in which frames condition and determine media audiences. So, framing was “framed” inside a frame of media effects similar to agenda setting (cf. Mendonça & Simões, 2012). Nevertheless, it is an applicability-based model, it differs fundamentally from accessibility-based models like agenda setting or priming.

There is also a recent development in media that suggests a clear demarcation between agenda setting (and priming) and framing.

Given that growing prevalence of online media in our lives and its never-registered capacities of dissemination of messages (including news but also rumors, fake news and personal opinions) and the ability of individuals to select their news (as well as their issues and their frames), both

agenda setting and framing theories will have to revise their core-assumptions and possibly to work together. Not working together as one, but *working together* as complementary perspectives on the media influence on public opinion.

Hence, “working together” does not mean that framing is a kind of media effect identical to second-level, attribute agenda but that each one is a fundamental rich, useful and balancing approach. They together illuminate what issues media audiences think about, but also how media and audiences understand those issues. So, in this respect, a full agenda setting study does not do without recognizing how those issues are understood and used – in other words, framed.

Indeed, agenda-building may be inseparable from news-framing processes (Moy *et alii.*, 2016, p. 11). Blogging and social media activity help likewise to determine newsworthiness and how issues are framed by citizens. This means we are now facing the serious possibility that traditional agenda builders and agenda setters are losing importance. Only empirical studies will demonstrate this hypothesis but

the prospect of this remind us that agenda building, and agenda setting will best define media's influence on public opinion in conjunction with a view that appreciate the cultural and sociological dimension of framing those issues.

This is to day today's online media role on making some issues more salient than others is inseparable from the reproduction of certain frames. Frame distribution enhanced by digital media is now a key aspect of media's influence on public opinion. Individuals select and share news and, at the same time, given we live in a plentiful information society, they can choose which frames they prefer, adopt and, above all, share with others.

So, the question today of online media is not only about their role on agenda setting but also their role in frame distribution and frame availability, and how frames are adopted and reproduced (Wu & Choy, 2018). Digital media and frame distribution introduce a new and radical layer between journalistic-focused frame-building and audience-focused frame setting (Moy *et al.*, 2016, p. 11).

This paper has established some

theoretical and methodological boundaries between agenda setting, priming and framing by taking a centripetal trend of research (McCombs *et al.*, 2014: 783); this is, by explaining the theoretical contours of agenda setting's core concepts. While the boundaries on agenda-setting and priming are almost overlapping (especially after the third level, network agenda setting), the same is not true to framing where its applicability model mark a clear frontier on them. Even if they describe media influence on public opinion formation, the nature of the influence is quite distinct, as we have seen.

The frontier between agenda setting and framing exists: but is is a porous frontier that like membranes surge them into entering a mutual dialogue in order to better describe how issues are accessible and have been framed. In effect, without a rooting attitude on the social construction of frames, accessibility-based models are vague and cannot fully explain the social reproduction of issues. In reverse, these porous frontiers between agenda setting and framing will take researchers to acknowledge that recurrent frames are frequent because

they are more accessible to both media and audience.

Framing, thus, is not an extension nor a refinement – a sub-species – of agenda setting. Framing is perhaps better described as the faithful companion of agenda setting research in the task of enlightening media role on political communication. Together they refer to the encompassing process in which “the most important problem to public opinion” may also be the one best framed (in both reiteration, distributive and discursive terms).

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