

Criminal, victim, bad luck, poor planning, failure of the system?

Framing and Agenda-Setting Theory: Widening the Linguistic Lens

This session addresses the theories of framing and agenda setting in the social sciences, primarily drawing on theories and studies in political communication. Political scientists are fond of saying that the media can’t tell you what to think, but can tell you what to think *about*. What does that mean and how can it help computational linguists? Figuring out how messages are encoded in the mass media is a critical step. At the same time, the same messages will be decoded in very different ways by different audiences. What questions should we be asking about how media frame messages? What questions should we be asking about how the audience then decodes those messages? At stake is nothing less than winning elections, controlling the public, and the very roots of power itself. In the post-Cold War era, what defense analysts call ‘hybrid’ or ‘gray’ war is now seen as a huge security threat, as the battle for hearts and minds goes global.

This class will begin by considering the arguments outlined in Robert Entman’s classic article on the popular War on Terror frame invented by the White House. How and why was this news frame created? How was it spread? How did the frame support Bush’s agenda? How was it challenged and why did these challenges fail? What does Entman’s study say about message encoding and decoding? We will also consider how the British explicitly rejected the War on Terror frame, going so far as to avoid reference to its worst Jihadi terrorist attack on July 7, 2005, by the month/day format because they didn’t want to compare it to 9/11. We will consider work by Thomas Patterson and others that shows how elections are becoming increasingly framed as ‘horse races’ rather than rational political discussions and talk about what this means for politics (and what studies might benefit us). We will consider some puzzling questions of news and resonance, such as by looking at short film about a study (The News Gap) that shows how editors and readers prioritize completely different kinds of issues and content. We will consider why British media and readers broadly accept the narrative that homelessness is the function of societal failures, while the US narrative almost always introduces personal blame or choice (as it does with criminal behavior). If we cannot agree on a frame for the problem, how can we agree on a frame for the solution? Finally, the class will consider media content (traditional mass media and social-media content) in the 2016 presidential election, with a particular focus on the riddle of Trump’s popularity.

The goals of the class are to give the students:

1. An understanding of framing and agenda-setting theory in the social sciences as a way to augment their theory-building capability;
2. Familiarity with classic work and case studies that use framing and agenda-setting;
3. Specific ways to link what they have learned this semester/year in their course to framing theories.

Lecturer/Discussion Leader:

Sarah Oates has been earning money by selling or analyzing words since she was 16. She first tried journalism, but found it was a lot of effort for relatively little reward. Cunningly, she turned to better employment in analyzing media, including news from Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. She has written books on media messages and audience reaction to elections, terrorism, and Russian oppression. Her most recent work focuses on finding evidence of civic activism in the Russian online sphere and investigating the depths of Russian propaganda against the West. She is Professor and Senior Scholar in the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at UMD. She has taught research methods to a generation of political scientists whether they wanted to learn it or not.