Frame Theory and its Relevance for Environmental Communication

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1. Frame Theory: Definitions

Frame theory has emerged as one of the principal paradigms in Communication Studies in the past decade, alongside and to a certain extent replacing older concepts such as Agenda-Setting and Priming (see Bryant and Miron 2004; Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007). Its relevance for environmental communication is that it offers an at least partial explanation for societal inaction and political gridlock on problems related to climate change, environmental degradation and food and water shortage.

Frames are defined in different ways: social scientists and researchers in cultural studies consider them as consciously adopted structures, while psychologists have tended to use the term more broadly to include unconscious framing. A general definition is that frames are interpretative storylines which communicate what is at stake in a societal debate and why the issue matters. As value-based systems of thinking, they play a crucial role in determining our responses to the issues they are applied to. (Scheufele 2000)

Frames provide models for understanding and defining environmental issues. Social movement theorists regard frames as linking two spheres of reality/ conceptual fields, so that after exposure to this linkage, the intended audience accepts the connection. In the United States, the Republican Party and conservative lobby groups reframed and redefined environmental issues in the 1990s in order to demonstrate no real action was necessary. Proponents of environmental action among the Democrats have since also sought to reframe environmental issues, so as to persuade hitherto uninterested sections of the public to agree to and participate in action. (Scheufele and Tewksbury 2004; Nisbet 2009; Lakoff 2010). Frames in this sense ("advocate frames") are conceptual tools for influencing problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and the allocation of responsibility for treatment.

But framing does not necessarily involve putting a party-political spin on environmental facts and statistics. For cognitive scientists, frames are not merely mental frameworks, but actual neural networks physically present in the brain, largely unconscious systems with internal logics which guide our reasoning. All efforts to communicate complex issues, they point out, inevitably involve selection, prioritisation, and strategies of presentation. And frames are not merely something in the minds of media experts, they are also present on the reception side. Nisbet 2009 writes: "Audiences use frames provided by the media as interpretative shortcuts but integrate these media

presentations with preexisting interpretations forged through personal experience, partisanship, ideology, social identity, or conversations with others."

Already in the 1970s the anthropologist Erving Goffman stressed that individuals' efforts to make sense of facts and figures frequently involve interpretation and organisation in terms of fundamental values: right and wrong, freedom and compulsion, intactness and pollution.

In a study of attitudes towards nuclear energy, William Gramson and André Modigliani (1989) devised a table with the following 8 frames which is frequently encountered in articles on the framing of environmental discourse:

Social progress
Economic development
Morality
Scientific uncertainty
Runaway science
Public accountability
Alternative paths
Conflict

These framing approaches/ master narratives make it easier for individuals to recognise the relevance of various environmental problems to their everyday lives and specific values. Mike Hulme discusses a similar range of frames in environmental discourse in his book *Why We Disagree About Climate Change* (pp. 225-244).

2. Framing and Culture

One aim of the CFED Network is to explore the relationship between Framing and Culture. Cultures can be understood as patterns of human activity and artefacts, and the symbolic structures which give these activities/ artefacts meaning and importance. They consist of systems of symbols and meanings, i.e. beliefs, norms of behaviour such as law and morality, and institutions of a population. These are passed down from generation to generation, but constantly contested and in flux. Cultures interact, compete with one another, and respond to environmental, economic and political change. At the same time, cultures consist of the codification of these norms in myth, structures of thought, works of literature and art.

Some frame theorists (Goffman 1981) have suggested that cultural differences explain why some individuals will take a particular argument on board whereas others will not. The latent meaning of a frame is conveyed by devices including not only catchphrases, metaphors, sound bites and graphics, but also allusions to history, culture and literature. Cultural resonances are important for readers/ listeners/ viewers: receivers connect the framing devices in a story not only with their own interests and concerns, but also with cultural phenomena they are familiar with. "By implicitly suggesting a cultural theme, the frames can determine which meaning the receiver attaches to an issue." (Van Gorp 2007: 63) In some frame packages, cultural phenomena (e.g. archetypal figures and narratives) play a central

role. But to constitute frames, these need to be accompanied by explicit or implicit statements of justification, indicating causes and consequences.

Van Gorp 2007 uses framing as a bridging concept between cognition and culture. He argues that the shared repertoire of frames in a given culture provides a linkage between the production and consumption of information (p. 61). As part of a culture, frames are embedded in media content, and they interact with the mental schemata of journalists and readers/ viewers. The individual is not at liberty to change the frames at will, because they are, as broad interpretative definitions of social reality, relatively persistent cultural phenomena. However, there is a cultural stock of frames which includes half forgotten alternatives, and these can be reactivated, leading to a redefinition of the topic. (Here Van Gorp appears to be drawing on theories of cultural memory.) A knowledge of cultural history can make us aware of the dominant frames of our time, and enable us to transcend them. For Van Gorp, framing thus involves an interplay between the media level (the structure of the text), the cognitive level (mental schemata), the level of frame sponsors (e.g. political parties), and the stock of frames in a given culture.

3. Framing, Culture and Environmental Discourse

Further work is required to define the concept of framing and its relationship with culture. The term is sometimes used synonymously with 'discourse': not only (political) actors, but also academic disciplines and even cultures are seen to "frame" environmental debates, either by imposing value systems or by drawing on repertoires of narratives and images.

Regarding the question what special qualities cultural representations of environmental issues possess (in the narrower sense of literature, film and art), it is often argued that they address the whole person, engaging with the senses and emotions as well as cognitive faculties. They may therefore have a key role to play in bridging the value/action gap and motivating to action. Research has shown that inner satisfaction from the perceived meaningfulness of one's life and joy in taking action are among the most important factors in young people's environmental commitment. Are certain forms of literature etc. particularly effective in instilling belief in the ability to bring about change, and empowering readers?

In Communication Studies, it is argued that a partial match between the discursive frame used in a text and that to which the addressee is accustomed is essential if communication is to succeed. Audiences tend to avoid environmentally related media that do not align with their beliefs and attitudes. Does literature, which makes more use of metaphors and imagery than discursive texts, have a particular role to play in connecting issues like climate change with aspects of people's personal lives and values – tapping into familiar frames which resonate with the public more than those in academic discourse and policy statements?

Whereas media writers tend to apply a consistent range of frames, thereby controlling the number of alternatives open to receivers as they construct their social reality, literature and art are perhaps rather sites of experimental reframing. They represent environmental issues in more complex, subtler and hence more powerful ways, which open discourse out to

alternatives, ambivalences and ironies. This raises the question of the role played by Creativity. Is creativity usefully conceived of as a process of reframing, perhaps rather of *de-framing*? Are particular media and genres especially effective vehicles for informing members of the public, enabling them to participate more actively in policy debates, and empowering them to change society, e.g. through consumer choices? Can environmental education be enhanced by training young people to recognise the framing of environmental issues, whether approached through political discourse or works of literature and art?

It is recognised that much learning takes place outside the classroom and is shaped by learners' interests, prior knowledge, social networks, and values/ beliefs. Another subject for consideration in the Network is the extent to which work on the ability of literature and film to motivate and empower children by linking environmental issues with their emotional and other concerns (entertaining as well as instructing), can fruitfully be brought together with theories of informal learning in environmental education. What texts, situations and institutions can facilitate such voluntary, collaborative learning, engaging through dialogue rather than instruction, among adults?

The arts are sometimes described as a mere medium for the popularisation and transmission of ideas. Can they constitute a source of knowledge in their own right? Environmental historians have begun to include examination of oral traditions and fictional narratives, myths and ballads in their search for evidence substantiating climate change. Development Studies researchers are arguing for the inclusion of novels about development in the curriculum, pointing out that there has always been a blurring of fact and fiction through incorporation of case studies and ethnographic accounts, and that crucial aspects of development initiatives which policy documents have tended to ignore are reflected in certain literary accounts (Lewis, Rodgers and Woolcock 2008). Fredric Jameson has argued that "the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions" (1981: 79). This conception of literature and art as thought experiments has recently been taken up again by Peter Swirski, who challenges the restriction of epistemological legitimacy to non-fiction, arguing that literature is an important source of knowledge.

4. Further Questions on the Part Played by the Arts in Environmental Discourse

Scientists and engineers are seeking ways of bridging the gap between C.P. Snow's Two Cultures, for instance by engaging with the lay public and stakeholders in public forums, at which personal, local and regional implications of global problems are worked out in a two-way exchange of information and perspectives. Blogs and digital news communities fulfil a similar function, with scientists seeking to frame their knowledge in ways which are more meaningful to their audiences. Museum curators have also developed new, effective ways of communicating messages about species loss and climate change. Can the experience gained from such initiatives be

brought together fruitfully with recent developments in documentary film and literature?

These notes have sought to explore the possibility of drawing together findings in different disciplines and agreeing on framing as a possible focus for our first workshop. However, our discussion and the papers may lead in a different direction. The second workshop (28 February – 1 March) will probably focus on issues of representation in the media, literature and film. At our third meeting (16 – 17 June), we will address the question of practical applications of our findings. Thinking ahead to the larger grant application which we would like to develop in the course of the life of the Network, there is clearly scope for much else. For instance synchronic and diachronic studies investigating the value-oriented framing of environmental discourse. Synchronic work could be intercultural and intermedial, while diachronic studies could examine changes over time and ask what external and internal factors are responsible for them.

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