

Framing and Political Communication: A Literature Review of Theoretical Foundations and International Conflict Reporting

Boming Li, & Wenjing Fei

College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Massey University

Abstract

Framing theory has become a foundational concept across social sciences and political communication, providing insights into how information is structured and interpreted. This paper explores key concepts of framing, including its diverse definitions, the distinction between frames in communication and frames in thought, and framing effects. It discusses how political communication strategically constructs frames to shape public perceptions, guide media narratives, and consolidate political power. The study also reviews framing practices in international conflict reporting, focusing on war, humanitarian crises, and economic conflicts. In war reporting, frames often create moral dichotomies, justify violence, and reflect national interests, with significant variation across countries and over time. Humanitarian crises tend to be framed through victimisation and emotional appeal, which can foster empathy but may also reinforce stereotypes and obscure structural causes. Economic conflicts, such as trade wars and financial crises, are framed to legitimise policy positions, reflect geopolitical alignments, and shape perceptions of blame and responsibility. By integrating theoretical foundations with cross-national applications, this study argues that framing theory remains a foundational concept in political communication studies to evaluate the media's role in international conflicts. Understanding these framing dynamics is essential to critically assess media's role in shaping public perception, political agendas, and international relations in an increasingly volatile global landscape.

Keywords: Framing, Framing Theory, Literature Review, Communication, Political Framing, International Conflict

Introduction

In recent years, the concept of framing has gained growing popularity in media research and has been adopted across various fields such as communication, sociology, and political science. Framing theory is a central analytical tool to understand how information is constructed, presented, and interpreted in political and international contexts. In an era marked by rising populism, political polarisation, disinformation campaigns, and escalating global conflict, framing theory offers a vital lens for examining how media narratives shape public perception, mobilise emotions, and legitimate power (Sarwar and Aziz, 2024). By shaping the portrayal of issues, events, and actors, frames influence public perception, opinion formation, and decision-making (Chong and Druckman, 2007b; Olmastroni, 2014). This influence is powerful because framing draws attention to certain aspects of reality while simultaneously omitting others, thereby shaping how individuals perceive and interpret events (Borah, 2011).

A key distinction within framing theory is between “frames in communication”, the structures embedded in messages and “frames in thought” the mental frameworks that guide individual interpretation (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Tversky and Kahneman, 1981). This distinction helps clarify the dynamic interaction between message construction and audience interpretation. Moreover, understanding framing effects how media frames affect attitudes, judgments, and decisions is central to the theory (Druckman, 2001b; McLeod and Detenber, 1999; Nelson et al, 1997). This paper examines framing effects through two commonly discussed dimensions, providing a nuanced interpretation of this process.

Building on this theoretical foundation, a distinction is drawn between non-strategic framing in news media and strategic framing in political communication. News framing is generally non-strategic, shaped by professional routines, sourcing practices, and institutional norms rather than deliberate persuasion (Shoemaker and Reese, 2013). In contrast, political actors (e.g., governments and parties) engage in strategic framing to define issues, assign blame, and shape public and media agendas (Hallahan, 2011). Although both involve selection and salience, this paper treats them separately: news frames are outcomes of news production, while political frames are instruments of influence, often attempting to dominate media narratives. This distinction is essential for understanding power dynamics in international conflict reporting.

Framing theory has been widely employed to analyse media coverage of complex political phenomena such as war, humanitarian crises, and economic conflicts. In these contexts, media narratives are constructed not only to inform but also to influence and persuade audiences by shaping perceptions of causes, moral responsibility, and potential solutions (Carragee and Roefs, 2004; Chouliaraki, 2010). These frames often reflect broader ideological, political, and institutional interests (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Pan, 2008). In international conflict reporting, for example, strategic selection and salience are used to construct national identity, justify violence, or advocate policy agendas (Entman, 2009; Manor and Crilley, 2018). Similarly, in economic disputes such as the U.S.–China trade war and the Eurozone debt crisis, framing determines not only what is considered newsworthy but also how accountability and legitimacy are assigned (Busby et al, 2019; Yang and Van Gorp, 2023).

Despite its widespread adoption, framing theory remains a “fractured paradigm” as Entman (1993) described, characterised by inconsistent definitions, fragmented application across subfields, and limited interdisciplinary synthesis (Borah, 2011; Cacciatore et al, 2016). This fragmentation obscures theoretical coherence and hinders practical applications, particularly in political communication, where frames influence global understanding of conflicts (Walter and Ophir, 2019). To address this gap, this paper employs a systematic literature review, synthesising core theoretical concepts with examples from prior studies on war, humanitarian crises, and economic conflicts. By integrating these dimensions, it contributes a unified theoretical framework that bridges siloed perspectives, clarifies the cognitive and strategic roles of framing, and supports future empirical and comparative research in evolving media landscapes.

Definition of Framing

Research on frames and framing is widely used across the social and cognitive sciences, along with numerous subfields of political science. Scholars across various fields including social movements, negotiation tactics, foreign policy, jury decisions, media influence, political psychology, public opinion, voting behavior, and political campaigns widely apply the concept of framing in their research (Druckman, 2001a). As it is applied broadly, the terms “frame” or “framing” often lack a clear and consistent definition.

Originally from sociologist Goffman (1974), he suggested frames are deeply rooted in cultural belief systems and guide how people interpret everyday experience. Frames not only simplify complex information but also shape and reshape individuals’ views of reality. Morley

(1976, p. 246) emphasised the significance of analysing the “basic conceptual and ideological framework” that shapes how events are portrayed, leading to one dominant interpretation over others. Gitlin (1980) described framing as a consistent way of thinking, interpreting, and presenting information by choosing what to highlight or omit. Communicators adopt these frames to organise large amounts of information and share it effectively and regularly with audiences. Gamson and Modigliani (1989) defined a frame as a central organising idea within media discourse that shapes how relevant events or issues are interpreted and understood. The frame functions as the core meaning structure that defines what is at stake in a given topic. Rather than prescribing a single viewpoint, a frame encompasses a range of positions within its interpretive boundaries, allowing debate among those who share it.

One of the most widely cited and influential definitions of framing comes from Entman (1993, p. 51), who defined framing as a “fractured paradigm” involving selection and salience. To frame is to highlight specific aspects in communication to influence how people define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies. Frames have four locations in communication: “the communicator, the text, the receiver, and the culture” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Communicators, either deliberately or unconsciously, make framing choices when deciding what to convey, guided by underlying frameworks that structure their beliefs. The text contains frames, revealed through the inclusion or omission of specific keywords, common phrases, typical images, information sources, and clusters of facts or judgments that reinforce particular themes. Receivers interpret the text through their own frames, which may align with or differ from those embedded in the text and the communicator’s original intent. Culture represents the shared collection of commonly used frames, which can be seen as the set of widely recognised frames reflected in public discourse and thought within a society. Across all four locations, framing serves similar functions: selecting and emphasising certain elements to build an argument about problems, their causes, evaluation, and solutions. Altheide and Schneider (2013) expanded the definition, describing frames as the central focus or boundaries for examining a particular issue, often serving as a main theme. In this sense, framing becomes a way of highlighting certain aspects over others. Pan (2008) explained that definition explores the cognitive basis of salience by detailing how different levels of salience are created through selection, where a frame is located within a text, and how these texts produce concrete political effects by reinforcing particular problem definitions and policy suggestions. This emphasis approach demonstrates how focusing on certain elements of information directs individuals’ attention to those specific aspects (Druckman, 2001a).

Hertog and McLeod (1995) argued framing sets the context for understanding an event the way an event is framed determines which information is relevant or irrelevant. For example, if a protest march is framed as a clash between police and demonstrators, the protesters' social criticism may be excluded not due to lack of space, but because it is not considered pertinent within that frame. Cappella and Jamieson (1997) described framing as the particular way a story is shaped or presented through headlines, word choices, rhetorical tools, narrative structure, and more. They argue frames can activate existing knowledge, draw on cultural values, and establish meaningful context.

Framing theory is based on the idea that an issue can be seen from different angles and be interpreted in relation to various values or concerns (Chong and Druckman, 2007a). Framing is how individuals shape their understanding of an issue or shift their perspective on the issue. According to Reese (2001, p. 11), "frames are organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world." Framing differs in how effectively and thoroughly it organises information, offering identifiable patterns or structures that range in complexity. These frames are grounded in abstract principles, distinct from the specific texts through which they are expressed. For a frame to be meaningful and communicable, it must be shared at some level among individuals. Additionally, the enduring significance of frames comes from their persistence and routine use over time, often revealed through symbolic forms of expression.

Despite its origins over five decades ago, framing theory remains highly adaptable to contemporary media environments (Roslyng and Dindler, 2023; Walsh and Schunn, 2025), particularly through its core mechanisms of frames in communication, frames in thought, and framing effects the focus of the following sections. While foundational definitions emphasise selection, salience, and cultural resonance, recent scholarship has extended these concepts to digital and social media contexts (López-Rabadán, 2021; Wilk et al, 2024). For instance, platforms like Tik Tok and Facebook allow political actors and users to frame messages quickly with multiple modes, blurring traditional boundaries between message construction and interpretation (Klinger et al, 2024). This evolution underscores the enduring significance of framing in examining international conflict coverage, especially as digital narrative increasingly shapes global public opinion.

Frames in Communication and Frames in Thought

These definitions reveal two different interpretations: frames in communication and frames in thought. First, frames refer to words, images, phrases, and presentation styles that a communicator chooses when sharing information, known as frames in communication (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Gitlin, 1980). The specific frame selected by the communicators reflects what they consider relevant to the topic (Gamson and Modigliani, 1987). For example, a politician who focuses on security issues during a campaign discussion is employing a security frame, indicating that security matters are significant in that context. This approach is common in elite discourse (Pan and Kosicki, 1993; Simon, 2001). For instance, Gamson and Modigliani (1987) demonstrated that critics of affirmative action gradually moved from framing it as an undeserved advantage to framing it as reverse discrimination. In other words, the discourse shifted from asking whether African Americans deserved special rights to questioning whether it was fair to limit the rights of whites to help African Americans.

Second, frames describe an individual's cognitive interpretation of a situation, known as frames in thought (Goffman, 1974; Tversky and Kahneman, 1981). In this context, a frame is not a feature of communication but rather reflects how a person perceives and makes sense of a situation (Druckman, 2001a). It highlights what the individual considers important for understanding that situation. For instance, a person who evaluates political candidates based on their security policies is considered to have a security frame of mind.

Frames in communication and frames in thought are similar, both focused on differences in emphasis or salience. The key difference is that frames in communication pertain to what a speaker says such as key points emphasised in elite discourse while frames in thought focus on what an individual thinks such as the aspects of an event a citizen thinks are most significant (Druckman, 2001a).

Framing Effects

Frames in communication often significantly influence frames in thought a process known as a framing effect. Framing effects, introduced by Tversky and Kahneman (1981), show that how choices are presented can shape an individual's judgments and decisions. People's preferences are strongly by the way options are worded or framed. Research on framing effects has developed into two main areas: valence framing effects and emphasis framing effects, each exploring distinct effects. One type, known as valence framing or equivalency framing, explores how using different but logically similar words or phrases like "5 percent

unemployment” versus “95 percent employment” (Quattrone and Tversky, 1988) can change people’s opinions (Druckman, 2001a). This effect happens when the same essential information is framed in either a positive or negative way, leading people to respond differently.

According to Levin et al. (1998), there are three types of valence framing effects: risky choice framing, attribute framing, and goal framing. First, risky choice framing presents possible outcomes of a decision with varying levels of risk in different ways. People’s preferences between risky and riskless options both having the same expected outcome—varied depending on whether options were framed positively or negatively (Tversky and Kahneman, 1981). When outcomes were framed positively (highlighting gains), people tended to choose safer and risk-averse options; when framed negatively (emphasising losses), people were more likely to take risks. This demonstrates that choices can be influenced by wording rather than purely rational evaluation. Second, attribute framing focuses on a particular feature of an object or event (Levin et al, 1998), emphasising how its positive or negative description affects people’s evaluations. Unlike risky choice framing, which involves choosing between independent options, attribute framing measures basic evaluations such as rating favorability or making yes/no judgments reflecting how framing affects perception directly. Third, goal framing highlights the intended outcome or purpose of an action, presenting issues in terms of potential gains (positive frame) or potential losses (negative frame). Both frames aim to encourage the same action, but the key question is which frame emphasising gains or avoiding losses is more effective at persuading people. This effect is widely used in persuasive communication, where messages stress either the rewards of acting or the risks of inaction to influence decision-making.

The second type of framing effect, known as emphasis framing effect, occurs when a speaker highlights certain relevant factors, prompting people to pay more attention to these factors when forming their opinions (Druckman, 2001a). For example, if a politician frames a campaign around human-interest issues, voters are likely to assess politicians in terms of their human-interest policies. This can lead voters to favor politicians with a stronger human-interest stance. Like valence framing effects, emphasis framing effects shape opinions by drawing attention to specific facets or descriptions of an issue. However, unlike valence framing where different frames present logically equivalent versions of the same message emphasis framing involves highlighting distinct and potentially relevant considerations.

Researchers have explored two main effects of emphasis framing (Druckman, 2001b). One approach looks at how different frames cause people to base their opinions on different reasons, without focusing much on their overall stance. For instance, Kinder and Sanders (1990)

found that when framed as undeserved advantage, White individuals oppose affirmative action mainly due to racial biases, while a reverse-discrimination frame causes opposition based on perceived threats to their own group's interests. Another approach focuses on how frames change overall opinions without examining the underlying reasons. For instance, Sniderman and Theriault (2004) discovered that public support for increased government spending on the poor rises when such spending is portrayed as a means of helping them advance in society.

Framing in Political Communication

Framing operates on two distinct levels in political communication, distinguished by intent and agency. Strategic framing is employed intentionally by political actors to shape public opinion, guide media coverage, and build support (Benford and Snow, 2000; Hallahan, 2011; Matthes, 2012). Elites selectively emphasise issues where they have an advantage and employ polling to tailor messages. These frames are proactive tools of persuasion, often designed to influence news coverage. By contrast, news framing is largely non-strategic: reporters construct stories through routine practices guided by newsworthiness, institutional constraints, and cultural proximity (Shoemaker and Reese, 2013). While news frames may reflect institutional biases, they are not crafted with persuasive intent. Political actors often target these passive news frames, generating a ripple effect in which strategic political framing aims to dominate public discourse.

A growing body of literature has examined how political figures, particularly presidents, manipulate frames to maintain or enhance their popularity, respond to public opinion, and control the agenda in both domestic and international contexts. For instance, Druckman and Holmes (2004) investigated the strategic frames used in President George Bush's 2002 State of the Union address. Faced with a divided audience, whose attention was shifting from terrorism and homeland security to a struggling economy and potential recession, Bush was predicted to highlight terrorism and the economy equally in response to this shift in focus. However, Bush strategically emphasised terrorism and homeland security because his approval ratings in this area were dramatically higher (about 86 percent) compared to the economy (about 31 percent). By framing the nation's status around terrorism, Bush aimed to boost his public image, which he successfully did. This strategy was evident in his address, with 49 percent of his focus on terrorism and only 10 percent on the economy, influencing subsequent media coverage (Gubitze et al., 2018). Druckman and Jacobs (2020) expanded this understanding by examining how contemporary U.S. presidents use framing to influence public

opinion. Three U.S. presidents, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, and Ronald Reagan were investigated to explore how these governments utilised private polling data to impact public perception. The presidents monitored public opinion on various issues, and then framed their statements accordingly to emphasise the topics that could improve their public image.

Additionally, the public's response to the initial frame can impact how the administration adjusts its frames. Iyengar and Kinder (2010) examined how media framing affects the salience of political issues, demonstrating that the framing of news stories can determine which issues the public considers important. Similarly, Barone and Swan (2009) found that framing in the context of the 9/11 attacks shaped public opinion on civil liberties, illustrating how media narratives can shift values and beliefs depending on the emphasis applied. Other scholars have extended this work to international contexts. Roth and Gray (2012) examined how media framing and cultural factors impact public perception and policy decisions regarding foreign conflicts, while Tarish et al (2022) explored how the American media frame the speeches of Presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump concerning the foreign policy of the Middle East.

While political figures use framing to shape public opinion and influence the media, these efforts are often amplified, reinterpreted, or challenged by journalistic practices, especially in the context of international conflict. The next section examines how media institutions frame global conflicts, how these practices reflect broader political and cultural interests, and how framing influences audience perception of war and peace.

Framing Practices in International Conflict Report

Framing in international conflict reporting is one of the most insightful and critical applications of framing theory in communication studies. Rather than merely describing events, these practices actively construct political realities, shape public opinion, and influence diplomatic outcomes (Carragee and Roefs, 2004). Through strategic selection and salience, framing patterns identify which aspects of the conflict such as causes, actors, consequences, or solutions are emphasised or omitted. The process can underscore specific interests, biases, or agendas, making it essential to critically examine how conflicts are portrayed. Therefore, understanding these framing dynamics is crucial for evaluating media narratives and their broader implications for international relations.

Framing theory provides a useful lens for examining how media interpret and mediate meaning during international crises. Unlike domestic issues, which may be covered with relative proximity and cultural familiarity, international conflicts require the media to act as

interpreters of distant events, cultures, and ideologies. The frames that journalists and media institutions use guide audience interpretation, especially when direct experience is lacking. These frames also intersect with national identity, foreign policy agendas, journalistic norms, and public sentiment all of which shape the final media product (Gilboa, 2002).

Scholars increasingly use framing theory to explore how wars, humanitarian crises, and political and economic tensions are constructed in the global news agenda. This includes analysing frame selection, frame contestation among different actors (e.g., states and media outlets), and frame effects on public opinion and policy outcomes. In the digital era, framing has become more complex and dynamic, often combining official, journalistic, and user-generated narratives. These developments call for a renewed focus on framing practices not only as static textual features but as part of interactive, transmedia processes embedded in cultural and political structures (Chong and Druckman, 2007a; D'Angelo and Kuypers, 2010).

Framing War

The study of how wars and conflicts are portrayed in the media is critical to understanding the broader political, cultural, and social implications of these events. Media framing of war is not merely a reflection of battlefield realities it is a powerful process that shapes public perception, policy debates, and ultimately, political outcomes. This section reviews key scholarly contributions that reveal the complex, strategic, and dynamic nature of war framing in the media.

For instance, in their analysis of U.S. and Swedish coverage of the Iraq War, Dimitrova and Strömbäck (2005) found American media were more likely to emphasise military strategy and national interest, whereas Swedish media highlighted civilian suffering and international law. The differences illustrate meso-level institutional and normative factors that influence framing decisions. Media framing can shape public opinion differently across countries by focusing on certain aspects of war while ignoring others, potentially fostering national consensus or silencing dissenting perspectives.

Boydston and Glazier (2013) used the example of the “War on Terror” to showcase how media framing evolves over time. They proposed a two-tiered approach, where the first level focuses on issue-specific frames (such as democratisation, terrorism, weapons of mass destruction), and the second level deals with generalisable frames (such as gain vs. loss or self-referential vs. other-referential frames). This paper highlights how the framing of the war shifted from predominantly fear-based, self-referential loss frames to more charity-based, other-referential gain frames. It shows how early media coverage emphasised potential losses

(e.g., the danger to U.S. troops) later shifted to potential benefits (e.g., democratisation efforts). The approach provides compound insights into the framing process, enhancing our understanding of how media influence public opinion and policy decisions.

Manor and Crilley (2018) examined how the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) used Twitter to frame the 2014 Gaza War. They identified 14 linguistic frames, supported by visual media, to legitimise Israel's policies. The study highlighted three main visual tropes: Israel as the only democracy in the Middle East, a high-tech start-up nation, and the David-versus-Goliath narrative. These frames created a moral dichotomy between Israel and Hamas, portraying Israel as morally superior. The research underscored the MFA's proactive and reactive framing and its strategic use of digital diplomacy to influence global audiences. However, news organisations and journalists are not the only actors employing framing techniques; governments also construct frames to present their policies positively in the media. The use of framing by governments is especially evident in foreign policy and war contexts (Entman, 2009).

Vladislavljević (2015) provided a critical overview of how contemporary media frame different types of political conflict. He approached the research through three lenses: interstate and civil wars, institutional conflicts and popular protest in democracies, conflicts in non-democratic regimes and democratisation. This study highlights the importance of understanding the political context in which media framing occurs and its impact on political outcomes. Framing is strategic when communicators such as politicians, commentators, and editorial writers aim to exert political influence by proposing interpretations that advance their interests or goals.

Frames in communication can be seen in how different outlets or state actors choose to present an issue (e.g., U.S. strategic/military vs. Swedish humanitarian priorities; the digital tropes of the Israeli MFA). These choices strategically underscore definitions of problems and their morality. Such cues shape how audiences think about the issue, guiding them to focus on aspects like security, legality, or victimhood when evaluating a conflict. The resulting framing effects appear as emphasis effects (e.g., civilian suffering vs. military success), valence effects (e.g., -liberation/security-gains vs. -casualty/occupation-losses), and affect perceived legitimacy, intervention support, and toleration of cost.

These studies demonstrate that war coverage is far from neutral or objective. Instead, media narratives actively interpret, emphasise, or obscure aspects of conflict to align with political, cultural, and institutional interests. This process is influenced by journalistic routines, institutional norms, and geopolitical considerations. Scholars have identified recurring frame

types such as military strategy, human interest, victim, and moral evaluation that shape how conflicts are portrayed and understood by audiences (Canetti et al, 2019). Research by Dimitrova and Strömbäck (2005) and Boydston and Glazier (2013) illustrates framing shifts across time and context, reflecting underlying power dynamics and audience expectations. Similarly, strategic framing by state actors, as Manor and Crilley (2018) show, demonstrates how governments actively engage in shaping international public opinion to legitimise their policies. Vladislavljević (2015) further underscores that framing is inherently political, functioning as a tool for competing actors to shape domestic and global understandings of conflict. Overall, these insights reveal war reporting is a highly contested arena where selective emphasis and symbolism construct meaning, reinforce moral dichotomies, justify violence, and shape policy debates (Markham, 2013; Hackett, 2006).

Framing Humanitarian Crises

Framing theory has proven valuable in the analysis of humanitarian crises, where media representations significantly shape public understanding, emotional engagement, and political reactions (Berinsky and Kinder, 2006; Xu and Zhang, 2024). Commonly identified humanitarian frames include victimisation, human interest, responsibility, and intervention/relief, which serve to construct both the moral narrative and the call to action (Chouliaraki, 2010; Cottle and Nolan, 2007). These frames determine what is reported and how suffering is contextualised shaping the line between compassion and indifference.

A critical concern in this area is the tendency of Global North media to emotionally charged, individualised portrayals emphasising helpless victims and heroic aid responses (Pantti et al, 2012). While these frames may mobilise short-term attention and donor support, they risk reinforcing stereotypes of passivity and dependency, especially when local agency and political complexity are downplayed. This suggests the need for media to move beyond emotional appeal and incorporate more nuanced portrayals that respect the dignity and resilience of affected communities.

Comparative and cross-cultural research further demonstrates that frame selection is shaped by media systems, national ideologies, and geopolitical interests. For example, Zhang and Fahmy (2009) compared how *The New York Times* (U.S.) and *The Moscow Times* (Russia) covered political movements in Ukraine, Belarus, and Uzbekistan. They found *The New York Times* exhibited a pro-movement bias, using more favourable terms and sources, while *The Moscow Times* showed a pro-incumbent bias, often depicting protesters unfavourably. Both

newspapers focused on internal causes of the movements, but *The Moscow Times* placed more emphasis on external influences, such as U.S. involvement. The study underscores the influence of geopolitical interests on media coverage and the challenges of maintaining journalistic independence.

Ardèvol-Abreu (2015) compared specific frames with generic frames in humanitarian crisis reporting, investigating how Spanish newspapers cover countries experiencing such crises. The findings revealed that most humanitarian crises are underreported, with Afghanistan receiving the most attention. Media often employ mixed frames, such as attributing responsibility for to governments, rather than classic framing types. The discussion points out that media tend to overlook many crises, concentrating on a few, and emphasising conflict and human interest over economic consequences and moral considerations. The study calls for more balanced and comprehensive reporting on humanitarian crises.

Humanitarian crises within conflict zones are frequently framed through a lens of suffering and victimhood, rather than through a critical interrogation of root causes or international complicity. As Chouliaraki (2006) argued, this spectacle of suffering risks fostering disengaged spectatorship rather than active public concern. Such framing may ultimately weaken democratic accountability by diverting attention from the root causes of crises and international complicity. Thus, a critical examination of framing practices reveals their potential to either sustain or challenge prevailing power structures.

In this case, communication frames are victimisation, responsibility, and intervention discourses, which shape the sense of agency or lack thereof for the agentic and the agented. These cues when combined with frames can promote compassion, deservingness, or fatigue. The effects of framing include emphasis effects (e.g., focusing on human-interest details tends to increase willingness to support relief) and goal framing/attribute framing (loss-focused versus gain-focused appeals to prevent suffering or save lives), which can motivate action but may also shift attention away from structural factors.

In conclusion, framing theory helps explain how media influence audience perceptions, emotional engagement, and political will to humanitarian crises. The dominance of victimisation and human-interest frames, particularly in the Global North media, often mobilises empathy but risks oversimplifying complex realities and reinforcing stereotypes. Comparative studies, such as those by Zhang and Fahmy (2009) and Ardèvol-Abreu (2015), underscore the extent to which national ideologies, media systems, and geopolitical interests shape frame selection and narrative emphasis. This literature reveals a persistent tension between eliciting compassion and promoting critical awareness highlighting the need for more

nuanced, context-sensitive reporting that does not merely depict suffering, but interrogates its origins and systemic perpetuation.

Framing of Economic Conflicts

Economic conflicts, such as trade wars, financial crises, and transnational development projects, are fertile ground for media framing analysis. These conflicts are shaped not just by material realities but by how media highlight and interpret events, influencing public perception and policy legitimacy. Across different geopolitical contexts, media apply distinct frames depending on institutional interests, political alignments, and audience expectations.

The U.S.–China Trade War. The U.S.–China trade war (2018–2020) provides a clear example. American media often adopted a national-interest frame, aligning tariffs with the protecting domestic industries and national sovereignty. Trump’s populist “Tariff Man” rhetoric reinforced a blame frame, casting China as responsible for economic problems (Busby et al, 2019). This rhetorical strategy mobilised public sentiment against globalisation while legitimising protectionist policies. In contrast, Chinese state media framed the conflict through a global economic consequence lens, emphasising the broader risks to the world economy and advocating for multilateral cooperation. Ha et al. (2020) found that the outlets such as *Xinhua* and *People’s Daily* portrayed the trade war as a product of U.S. unilateralism, framing China as a rational actor defending global stability. The conflict frame was also used to depict China as a victim of Western aggression, highlighting resilience and national dignity.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The framing of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) varies significantly between domestic and international media. Chinese outlets emphasised the BRI’s potential for development, employing a national-interest and economic-opportunity frame to highlight mutual benefits and “win-win” cooperation. This narrative constructed China as a benevolent global leader, fostering connectivity and infrastructure development (Huang, 2016). Western media, particularly in the U.S. and Europe, often framed the BRI with skepticism and strategic conflict frames. Concerns over “debt-trap diplomacy,” neo-colonial ambitions, and the geopolitical motivations behind the initiative were prominent. These frames emphasise power imbalances and portray recipient countries as vulnerable, contributing to narratives of China as a challenger to Western hegemony (Yang and Van Gorp, 2023).

The 2008 Global Financial Crisis. Media framing of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC) played a crucial role in shaping public understanding of its causes and appropriate responses. In the U.S., coverage often employed an episodic frame that focused on individual

failures such as personal debt and irresponsible borrowing thereby deflecting attention from systemic regulatory issues (Iyengar et al, 1991; Krippner, 2012). This individual responsibility frame supported narratives justifying austerity and neoliberal recovery policies. European coverage varied: German tabloid *Bild-Zeitung* notoriously used blame frames to depict Southern European nations, especially Greece, as lazy and corrupt, fuelling public opposition to EU bailouts (Mylonas, 2012). Meanwhile, Greek media adopted a structural injustice frame, attributing the crisis to EU-level economic imbalances and austerity pressures from creditor institutions.

The Eurozone Debt Crisis. The Eurozone debt crisis further illustrated the interplay of media framing and national interests. Northern European media particularly in fiscally conservative countries like Germany used moral judgment and blame frames, framing the crisis as a result of profligate Southern European governments (Streeck and Schäfer, 2013). This reinforced public resistance to financial assistance and austerity relaxation. Southern European media, by contrast, emphasised the consequences of imposed austerity and the undemocratic nature of European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund mandates. Such frames positioned debtor nations as victims of structural inequality, contributing to discourses of injustice and democratic deficit within the European Union.

In this context, casual attributions and responsibility are structured by frames such as national interest, blame/credit, sovereignty, or structural injustice. These framing guide how audiences weigh protection, fairness, or integration. The resulting framing effects include emphasis effects (e.g., domestic job protection vs. global spillovers) and valence effects (tariffs as shields vs. tax; austerity as discipline vs. punishment), systematically manipulating attitudes toward tariffs, bailouts, and multilateral cooperation.

In conclusion, the reviewed examples underscore the pivotal role of media framing in shaping public understanding and legitimising policy responses during economic conflicts. Across diverse geopolitical contexts from the U.S.–China trade war to the Eurozone debt crisis media narratives selectively emphasise causes, consequences, and moral evaluations in ways that align with national interests, political ideologies, and structural media constraints. While Chinese state media tend to reinforce themes of resilience, sovereignty, and global cooperation, Western commercial media often highlight conflict, strategic competition, and individual accountability. These findings reveal that economic conflicts are not only struggles over material resources but also battles over meaning and perception. As such, future research should further explore comparative framing across media systems, investigate audience

reception, and assess the implications of framing for international political communication and global economic governance.

Conclusion

Framing theory offers a compelling framework for understanding how meaning is constructed, communicated, and interpreted in political discourse. Its conceptual evolution from Goffman's foundational insights to Entman's systematic model of selection and salience demonstrates the theory's adaptability across cognitive, cultural, and communicative contexts. The distinction between frames in communication and frames in thought is particularly important, as it explains how external message construction interacts with internal cognitive processing to influence public opinion and decision-making. Moreover, framing effects, such as valence and emphasis framing reveal how subtle shifts in language or focus can powerfully shape judgments, preferences, and policy outcomes.

The application of framing theory to international conflicts, humanitarian crises, and economic disputes highlights its indispensable role in understanding the media's influence on public discourse and policy formation. Media frames not only structure how conflicts and crises are understood but also reflect broader political, cultural, and institutional interests (Gilboa, 2009). In war coverage, framing guides moral evaluations, justifies violence, and steers political debates. In humanitarian contexts, dominant victimisation and human-interest frames mobilise empathy but can oversimplify complex realities. In economic conflicts, media framing mediates public perception and legitimacy in ways linked to geopolitical alignments and media systems. These examples show framing is not just about communication but also about contest over meaning and power in global affairs. Framing theory thus remains a cornerstone of political communication research, providing a vital framework for analysing media's role in constructing political realities in international conflicts.

Empirical studies show framing is strategic and ideologically charged, reflecting broader power structures, cultural narratives, and institutional goals (Snow, 2004; Zald, 1996). Whether constructing national identities in war reporting, emotional engagement in humanitarian coverage, or policy actions in economic crises, media frames serve as tools for influence and persuasion. These findings underscore the urgent need for critical media literacy and comparative framing research that transcends national boundaries. Examining framing practices helps uncover how public discourse is shaped and encourages more transparent, inclusive, and responsible communication. By linking theoretical foundations with applications

in international conflict reporting, this paper addresses the gap in cross-cultural integration and multimodal dynamics. It enables researchers to move beyond isolated examinations toward comparative and predictive frameworks, such as evaluating geopolitical influences on narrative construction.

Despite its broad utility, framing research faces several limitations. This research focuses on media content analysis, with less attention on audience reception or long-term effects across cultures. In addition, the existing literature is largely Western-centric, raising concerns about generalisability. Future research should aim to bridge these gaps by incorporating interdisciplinary methods that combine textual analysis with audience studies and cognitive psychology. Comparative investigations across media systems and geopolitical environments are particularly needed to deepen understanding of how frames operate in varied political and cultural settings.

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