

Book Reviews

News Frames and National Security: Covering Big Brother

Douglas McLeod and Dhavan V. Shah

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Did media coverage contribute to Americans' tendency to favor national security over civil liberties following the 9/11 attacks? This question is the starting point of McLeod and Shah's analysis of news frames connected to the USA PATRIOT Act and their effects on how U.S. citizens perceive and judge this issue.

As McLeod and Shah elaborately discuss, the 9/11 attacks deeply changed U.S. politics and media debates as they put questions of national security and terrorism at the center of political and media attention. President Bush declared the war on terror and the U.S. government introduced a number of measures to safeguard national security. Instead of improving the safety of citizens, some considered these measures as a danger to civil rights. A schism in media discourse emerged between activist groups concerned about civil rights and government authorities emphasizing the challenges for national security. McLeod and Shah's book illustrates which frames emerged and grew to dominate the media debate about government surveillance. A descriptive mapping of news coverage about government surveillance stories demonstrates that media discourse through the years (2001–2009) evolved from emphasizing concerns of national security toward more attention for civil

rights and privacy concerns. While the authors provide a sound and rigorous introduction to the media debate concerning government surveillance, the main focus of McLeod and Shah's study lies in explaining how different frames and cues prevalent in the public sphere shaped the perceptions and judgements of U.S. citizens. To do so, the authors rely on two online survey-embedded experiments.

There is much to praise about this monograph. Overall, the book is well documented and empirically sound. In my view, it offers one of the best available literature reviews of the framing literature in communication studies. Despite the fact that the framing literature is sometimes a minefield of incompatible conceptualizations, the authors successfully integrate these multiple approaches and based on this they build their own theoretical framework. In building on former work, McLeod and Shah also develop a novel distinction between *individual* and *collective* story frames. This distinction is very different from the individual- and collective-level framing distinction developed by Baumgartner and Mahoney (2008). Individual frames refer to individual exemplars (such as one particular Muslim citizen) while collective frames refer to collective entities and groups (such as a civil-rights activist group). This distinction between individual and collective frames lies at the center of their empirical analyses. The empirical evidence presented impressively proves

the relevance of the new distinction. In almost each analysis, the individual story frame triggers significantly stronger effects on citizens' judgments compared to the collective-level frame. For instance, when the news story in an experiment was framed from an individual perspective, subjects were more likely to oppose the cause of an activist group they disliked.

Although the empirical analysis is compelling, the authors could have devoted more attention to arguing why their new distinction is theoretically relevant. Why would we expect different effects when news is brought from an individual or collective angle? One argument the authors make is that news consumers can more easily make sense of self-controlled entities, such as individuals. I could not help but wonder whether news consumers are simply not more interested in news stories framed around persons rather than groups and therefore process this type of information more attentively. One other explanation could be that such stories provide more opportunity for identification, empathy, or antipathy (see for instance Schudson, 1991).

What I also missed is an analysis of framing effects in the "real world." All the analyses of framing effects were derived from survey-embedded online experiments. What about citizens exposed to real media coverage? The experiments offer some important insights into the causal mechanisms at play, but it remains an open question to what extent the results are generalizable to U.S. public opinion; especially because mostly students participated in the experiments. Of course every study is limited, but an

analysis of media effects combining content analysis and public opinion data on media exposure could have allayed these concerns of external validity more convincingly (see for instance De Bruycker & Walgrave, 2014).

Next to introducing a new framing distinction, an important contribution of this book is that it empirically demonstrates that framing effects should not be interpreted as simple main effects. In line with earlier studies (see for instance Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson, 1997; Druckman, 2004), McLeod and Shah show that framing effects are mediated by personal predispositions of news consumers (such as their political values and preferences). A novel contribution is that the authors also demonstrate that interactions between different textual elements in a news story account for differences in framing effects. Namely, different *combinations* of frames and cues within one news story result in different patterns of citizens' judgments. For instance, effects of negative cues toward an activist group are strengthened by the individual frame rather than the collective frame.

The different analytical chapters of the book excel in empirical and analytical rigor and novelty. Almost each analytical chapter of the book deals with a different dependent variable (among others: tolerance, cognitive complexity, the willingness to share views about groups). This provides a rich body of analyses and results, but it also comes at a cost. It is not always crystal clear what exactly is being predicted and why. Moreover, it remains underspecified how the various dependent variables are related to each other and are part of one cognitive framework. Sometimes the overall

narrative-structure of the book “covering big brother” and its overarching theoretical framework got lost in the detail of the analyses. That being said, in the conclusion McLeod and Shah manage to take some distance from their detailed empirical analyses and provide a clear helicopter view of the results and their link with their theoretical framework.

To whom would I recommend this book? The introduction, the first chapter, and the conclusion are highly recommended to any scholar interested in framing, not only specialists in the disciplines of communication research and political psychology. Chapter 2 offers an easy-to-read and well-documented overview of the USA PATRIOT Act issue and is definitely a worthwhile read for anybody interested in this topic. Chapters 2–7 are recommended to specialists in the field of political psychology, framing research in communication studies, and experimental research in the social sciences.

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