Differentiating Framing from Priming and Persuasion:
Psychological Mechanism, Competition Effect, and Duration Over Time

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by

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ABSTRACT

This research project examined several key problems about framing effect unsolved in the existing literature and clarified how framing studies can contribute new knowledge to the intertwined relationship between mass communication and public opinion by differentiating framing from priming and persuasion. Framing studies hitherto lacked clarification of the psychological mechanism underlying framing effect. The existing literature also neglected the outcomes of dual exposure to competing frames compared with one-sided exposure. The duration of framing effect was presumed and overlooked due to inadequate comparison with the endurance of priming and persuasion effect. Five experiments were conducted to examine these unsolved questions.

Study 1 tested and differentiated the psychological mechanisms of framing and priming effect. The results revealed that priming effect occurred through the alteration of accessibility of primed concepts and beliefs. A primed belief concerning some specific political issue would become more accessible in people’s cognition and further affected the evaluation and attitude toward the issue. As a comparison, framing effect occurred through the alteration of applicability of beliefs that were taken into consideration by people for the evaluation of political issues. The belief promoted by the corresponding news frame was perceived more important and equivocally placed with higher weight in the evaluation. This mechanism suggested a unique route of news frames working on public opinion.

Study 2 intended to apply the accessibility explanation of priming effect and the applicability interpretation of framing effect in the domain of attribution of responsibility. It found that episodic frame escalated the importance of individual attributions in people’s attitude toward welfare policies and comparatively thematic frame resulted in higher importance of societal attributions in the overall evaluation. The findings suggested a further
confirmation to the propositions of study 1 about the differential mechanisms underlying framing and priming effect.

Study 3 differentiated framing from persuasion effect by taking into account the influences of frame valence and supporting argument. The findings suggested that the valence of news frame significantly influenced persuasion effect and supporting arguments strengthened both framing effect and persuasion effect of news frames. Persuasion effect in political communication occurred through direct influence on specific beliefs related to political issues. News frames nonetheless took effect by influencing perceived importance of the related beliefs in the overall evaluation. Framing and persuasion effect were thus confirmed to occur through different routes in the process of political communication affecting public opinion.

Study 4 explored the consequences of competition between news frames besides and above the one-sided frame adopted in the previous three studies. Competing frames promoted multiple but often contradictory aspects of and interpretations to a specific political issue. Exposure to competing frames instead of one-sided frame could complicate the effects of news frames on public opinion. The study found that the competition between two frames could strengthen framing effect by enhancing the perceived importance of both of the two beliefs promoted in the competing frames. Furthermore, competition between news frames deteriorated the predicament between rational attitude and inadequate deliberation. On one hand, the competition brought about cognitive ambivalence of the audiences and consequently hindered the formation of stable and reasonable political choices. On the other hand, exposure to competing interpretations of a political issue encouraged group deliberation and thus facilitated the acquisition of rational decisions.

Study 5 examined and compared the duration of priming, framing and persuasion effect and explored to what extent competing frames could contribute to the endurance of
Framing effect. Priming effect was found almost dissipated after initial exposure. The accessibility of the primed beliefs failed to last for one week. Framing effect could still be detected in the post test. And exposure to competing frames enhanced the endurance of framing effect compared with one-sided exposure. Persuasion effect relatively endured most compared with priming and framing effect. But bringing competition into exposure showed no additional effect on the endurance.

The findings of the five studies highlighted the contribution of framing effect theories to the field of political communication in additional to research on priming and persuasion effect. The psychological mechanism unique to framing effect confirmed in this research project suggested a subtle way of political communication influencing public opinion. This process was further complicated by the consequences of frames competition concerning cognitive ambivalence and deliberation motivation. The differential endurance of priming, framing and persuasion effect inspired future studies to explicate the communication effects on public opinion in real world situations where the detection of long-term effects was possible.

Key words: framing, priming, persuasion, expectancy-value model, belief importance, accessibility, applicability, attribution of responsibility, valence, argument, competing frame, ambivalence, deliberation, duration