

Critical book review

SÁDABA, T. *Framing: el encuadre de las noticias. El binomio terrorismo-medios*. (1st ed.). Buenos Aires: La Crujía, 2008, 251 pages.
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BY IOLANDA TORTAJADA

Professor of Communication Studies at the Universitat Rovira i Virgili

yolanda.tortajada@urv.cat



Framing reality to communicate it

Teresa Sádaba has a doctorate in communication from the Universidad de Navarra, where she is also a lecturer. The exact objective of her thesis, entitled “La teoría del encuadre desde una perspectiva simbólica” (*The theory of framing from a symbolic perspective*) and defended in 2001, is the analysis of framing theory. *Framing: el encuadre de las noticias. El binomio terrorismo-medios* is what has come from this work, which was published in 2006 by Ulzama Ediciones in its first edition (*Framing: una teoría de los medios de comunicación*).

A few years ago, Bryant and Miron (2004) included framing theory among the “26 most distinguished theories” of those related to mass media. In March 2007, the *Journal of Communication* published a special edition on *agenda setting*, *priming* and *framing* with the aim of maximising knowledge on theorisation and research in this area. Just two signs that indicate how up-to-date and opportune is Sádaba’s book in the field of communication.

Throughout the book, Sádaba seeks to answer a series of questions, such as “What is framing?, Why is it so relevant? What can we learn from it? What can it do for us? What is its relationship with the media?” (page 13). This is no simple task since, on the one hand, there are different definitions for the term *framing*, each with significant nuances and, on the other, the real challenge lies in making the concept operational and in studying framing processes. The author does this well and the result is a theoretical book, full of references to authors and trends but also making her own proposals and exemplifying her own statements with case studies on the relationships between the media and terrorism. Despite this dual approach, it is important to remember that the book is much more theoretical than an empirical analysis (the case studies occupy 27 out of the book’s 251 pages).

In the first chapter, entitled *The origin of the framing theory* (“El origen de la teoría del *framing*”), the author locates this concept within the context of interpretive sociology, giving a brief introduction to symbolic interactionism, phenomenology

and ethnomethodology, and takes from this her first definition: “Goffman’s frames are forms that are transmitted and shared by society, through which reality can be seen” (page 35). After analysing the research into social movements, Sádaba suggests that, although frames of media discourses are like maps – and that frames used by the media arise from journalistic work – this is inherent in the dynamic of the media itself and is not due to an ideological intention or an explicit desire for power. For the author, therefore, frames form part of the significant news process, making it possible for the audience to identify with the medium, even though authors such as Gitlin believe that frames organise social reality from a dominant position.

The second chapter places framing within the context of the theory of communication. If the previous chapter ended on the idea that media frames are providers of significant meanings, in this chapter Sádaba provokes debate about objectivity: “The answer provided by framing theory to objectivism is to negate its postulators, as it argues that, when recounting what happens, the journalist frames reality and introduces *his* point of view” (page 68). The author then introduces ‘agenda setting’ theory and a new debate: the ‘framing-agenda’ relationship. While McCombs and Ghanem consider framing to be a second level of agenda setting (the attributes level, since the media tell us what to think about certain things), other authors (Sádaba among them) believe that this is not true because framing is about interpretation not accessibility, and frames are situated above all within the sphere of news creation, not so much in the sphere of effects (which is another debate altogether). That said, the chapter focuses on the use of framing within the theory of communication, making reference to input from seminal authors and texts, to confront the definition of ‘frame’ as a selection of reality or as a key organiser of the news.

The next two chapters deal, respectively, with the cultural dimension and the representative dimension of framing, allowing the author to introduce her own proposals and look at frames from a symbolic perspective. “The symbolic perspective of framing highlights, above all, the relationship between

frames and concrete cultural contexts, extending culture as the shared arena for actions and meanings" (page 113). Thanks to media discourse, people construct their own meanings and now journalists develop these meanings according to a particular public opinion. Consequently, what ends up as relevant to the explanation is, especially, the communicative transaction produced between journalists and audiences, since the former, as well as taking their personal and professional values into account, also consider the culture and society to which they belong. Still, the cultural dimension must complement the representative dimension by overcoming a habitual lack in theoretical developments about *framing*, that have focused more on knowledge itself than what is not known and, as a consequence, haven't fully explained the transformation that occurs between what happens and what appears in the media. Sádaba retains Geertz's affirmation that symbols have the ability to be representative *of* and *for* reality. Symbols, therefore, express the world and at the same time give it shape. Communicative transaction and the double representative capacity of symbols are the two most relevant principles of the symbolic perspective of *framing*.

The author concludes by saying that we must think of framing beyond selective cognition and the transposition of knowledge, without interpreting frames, referring only to specific aspects or concrete characteristics such as selection, the same textual content or ideological focus, and overcoming such reductionist visions as Lakoff's, which only concentrate on language and give pride of place to political parties in the creation of frames. Rather, one must talk of shared symbolic production and consider that "a journalist's knowledge is linked to his communicative task and this is the key area that framing theory must highlight when dealing with the media" (page 212).

Regardless of whether one shares Teresa Sádaba's theory on the symbolic perspective of framing, her book gives us an accurate picture of the authors who have developed the concept and the debates that have emerged around it. This is a valuable book for those studying media theory because it connects the concept of framing and its current developments with the theoretical basis on which it is founded, and presents the debates surrounding the concept, allowing us to arrive at our own conclusions. It is a work that scholars in this area can also complement with the published articles from Number 1, Volume 57 of the *Journal of Communication* (where one can read debates that have taken place after the publication of the book, while pointing to the same direction) and a key work in this field such as *Frame Analysis*, by Erving Goffman, translated into Spanish by CIS in 2006.

Bibliography

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