Effects of News Framing on Public Opinion in United States

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this article was to analyze effect of effects of news framing on public opinion in United States.

Methodology: This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

Findings: News framing significantly influences public opinion in the United States by shaping how individuals interpret political, social, and economic issues. Frames emphasizing benefits tend to garner support, while those highlighting risks often lead to opposition. Framing can also reinforce existing biases, aligning public opinion with pre-existing views. Overall, news framing plays a key role in guiding public attitudes and political behaviors.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Framing theory, agenda-setting theory & cognitive dissonance theory may be used to anchor future studies on the effects of news framing on public opinion in United States. Media organizations should prioritize ethical reporting, ensuring that framing does not promote bias or contribute to polarization. Policymakers should consider regulating media ownership to prevent monopolization of news sources that could lead to biased or one-sided framing of issues.

Keywords*: News Framing, Public Opinion*

INTRODUCTION

Public opinion in developed economies often reflects a diverse range of views on political and social issues, which are influenced by factors such as media framing, political affiliation, and cultural values. For instance, in the United States, public opinion on climate change has shown significant shifts, with an increasing consensus on the need for action. According to a 2020 Gallup poll, 72% of Americans expressed concern about the effects of global warming, an increase from 58% in 2009 (Gallup, 2020). Similarly, Japan has witnessed growing support for gender equality in the workplace, although progress remains slow. A 2019 government survey revealed that 67.5% of Japanese women supported the idea of more equal employment opportunities, although only 25% felt that workplaces had adequate policies to support this (Government of Japan, 2019). These statistics reflect broader trends in both nations, where climate change and gender equality have become central issues in public discourse, influenced by both domestic policies and international norms.

In the United Kingdom, public opinion on immigration has fluctuated significantly, especially post-Brexit. A 2020 survey by the British Social Attitudes found that 56% of the UK population supported stricter immigration controls, up from 45% in 2015 (British Social Attitudes, 2020). Meanwhile, political divisions over issues like healthcare reform and welfare policies have persisted, with the National Health Service (NHS) consistently ranked as a key issue in public opinion polls. The 2020 British Election Study noted that public opinion on NHS funding was closely tied to political party alignment, with 80% of Labour voters favoring more investment compared to 55% of Conservative voters (British Election Study, 2020). These shifts highlight how political issues such as healthcare and immigration continue to shape public opinion and policy decisions in developed economies.

In developing economies, public opinion is often shaped by rapid socio-economic changes, government policies, and international influences. In India, public opinion on environmental protection has gained momentum due to rising air pollution levels in major cities. According to a 2019 survey by the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), 69% of Indians acknowledged that air pollution was a serious problem, with 85% supporting stricter government regulations on industrial emissions (CSE, 2019). Similarly, in Brazil, public opinion on deforestation in the Amazon has been a contentious issue. A 2020 survey by Datafolha found that 72% of Brazilians were concerned about deforestation, and 60% believed the government should take more action to curb it (Datafolha, 2020). These examples reflect the growing importance of environmental issues in public opinion, influenced by both domestic challenges and international climate agreements.

In South Africa, public opinion on economic inequality has gained attention, particularly regarding the "inequality gap" between rich and poor communities. According to a 2018 study by Pew Research Center, 60% of South Africans believed that income inequality had worsened in recent years, and 75% supported policies that promote greater wealth redistribution (Pew Research Center, 2018). Similarly, in Mexico, public opinion on drug violence and security has been a dominant political issue. A 2020 survey by Mexico's National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) found that 62% of Mexicans perceived drug-related violence as one of the country's most significant issues, with many supporting military involvement in combatting the cartels (INEGI, 2020). These cases highlight how pressing socio-economic issues such as environmental

protection and inequality continue to shape public opinion and influence government policies in developing economies.

In sub-Saharan African economies, public opinion is frequently influenced by governance, poverty, and health-related issues. In Nigeria, public opinion on corruption remains one of the most critical issues, with 89% of Nigerians stating that corruption is a major obstacle to economic development, according to a 2019 survey by Transparency International (Transparency International, 2019). Meanwhile, Kenya faces growing concerns regarding access to clean water, with 70% of the population expressing dissatisfaction with water services, as reported by the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) in 2020 (KNBS, 2020). These public opinions underscore the centrality of governance and basic services in the political discourse of many sub-Saharan economies, often compounded by systemic issues like corruption and inadequate infrastructure.

In South Africa, public opinion on the government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic reflected a sharp divide. A 2020 survey by Ipsos South Africa found that 55% of South Africans supported the government's stringent lockdown measures, though concerns about economic hardships led 40% of respondents to express dissatisfaction with the government's economic response (Ipsos South Africa, 2020). Similarly, in Ethiopia, public opinion on human rights and political freedoms has been heavily influenced by the ongoing conflict in the Tigray region. According to a 2021 survey by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC), 63% of Ethiopians expressed concerns over the government's handling of the conflict, with many calling for an international investigation into human rights violations (EHRC, 2021). These issues demonstrate how political, social, and human rights concerns heavily influence public opinion in sub-Saharan Africa, where conflict, governance, and service delivery remain central topics.

News framing refers to the way information is presented or structured in the media, influencing how audiences perceive issues. The most common types of news framing include positive, negative, neutral, and episodic frames. Positive framing highlights favorable outcomes or aspects of an issue, aiming to promote support or positive behavior. Negative framing, on the other hand, emphasizes the problems, failures, or risks associated with a topic, often leading to a critical or defensive public response. Neutral framing provides balanced coverage, presenting both sides of an issue without drawing conclusions, often leading to less polarized opinions. Episodic framing focuses on isolated events, presenting issues as discrete and temporary rather than part of a larger systemic problem (Iyengar, 1991).

These types of news framing can significantly shape public opinion on political or social issues. For instance, positive framing of climate change solutions can foster public support for green policies, while negative framing of immigration might fuel opposition and xenophobia (Entman, 1993). Similarly, neutral framing of healthcare reforms might leave the public divided, as they receive both the benefits and drawbacks without a clear stance, creating uncertainty. In contrast, episodic framing of social movements like Black Lives Matter can encourage public engagement by portraying individual experiences rather than focusing on systemic issues, potentially affecting long-term support for racial justice policies (Goffman, 1974). As media frames dictate how issues are understood, they play a crucial role in shaping the public's stance on important topics.

Problem Statement

The way news is framed by media outlets significantly influences public opinion on political and social issues. News framing, whether positive, negative, or neutral, affects how individuals interpret events, form opinions, and make decisions about policy matters (Schuck, 2021). In an era where media consumption is pervasive, the impact of news framing on public attitudes has become a critical area of study. For example, negative news framing on immigration can contribute to increased public opposition, while positive framing on social welfare policies may foster support (Valkenburg, 2018). Despite the growing body of literature, there is still limited understanding of how different types of news framing interact with demographic factors such as political affiliation and social background to influence public opinion. This gap necessitates further exploration to understand the mechanisms through which media frames shape individuals' perceptions and public discourse, particularly in the context of contemporary socio-political challenges.

Theoretical Review

Framing Theory

Framing theory suggests that the way in which media presents information influences the way people interpret and understand issues. By highlighting certain aspects of a story while downplaying others, media outlets create "frames" that shape public perception. Erving Goffman introduced the concept of framing in 1974, and it was later expanded by scholars like Robert Entman (1993), who argued that framing shapes not just public interpretation, but also societal norms and values. This theory is highly relevant to the research on the effects of news framing on public opinion because it directly addresses how media influences individual and collective perceptions through selective emphasis. For example, the framing of an economic crisis as a failure of government policies could lead the public to develop negative opinions about political leadership (Shah, 2018).

Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-setting theory, developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972, posits that while media might not dictate what people think, it has significant power in determining what issues people think about. By selecting and prioritizing particular topics, media outlets influence the public agenda, guiding the discourse on political and social issues. This theory is especially relevant when studying the effects of news framing on public opinion because it explains how media framing can elevate specific issues, making them more salient in the minds of the public. When the media continually frames a topic as important, such as climate change or immigration, it compels the public to focus their attention and form opinions on those issues (McCombs & Shaw, 2020).

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Cognitive dissonance theory, introduced by Leon Festinger in 1957, suggests that individuals experience discomfort when their beliefs or behaviors are in conflict, leading them to seek consistency by adjusting their beliefs or attitudes. This theory is relevant to the topic of news framing because media framing can create dissonance in individuals who are exposed to news that conflicts with their existing beliefs. For instance, when a person who believes in a particular political ideology is confronted with a media frame that contradicts their views, they may change their opinions to reduce the psychological discomfort. In the context of news framing, this theory

helps explain how media can shift public opinion by presenting frames that challenge or reinforce viewers' pre-existing attitudes (Banas & Soni, 2021).

Empirical Review

Shah (2018) determined how different frames in the media coverage of the election influenced the public's perceptions and voting behavior. The researchers employed a quantitative content analysis of the media's coverage of political candidates, alongside surveys measuring public opinion on key political issues and candidates. Their findings revealed that negative frames regarding political candidates had a significant influence on voter behavior, particularly in how candidates were perceived by the electorate. Negative frames portrayed candidates in a manner that amplified their perceived flaws, leading to a more unfavorable view of their policies and personal characteristics. On the other hand, positive media coverage was shown to increase public support for the candidates by framing them as trustworthy and capable. This study underscored the power of media framing in shaping voter perceptions, highlighting that framing can influence electoral outcomes by altering how issues are understood by the public. The study recommended that journalists and media outlets carefully consider the implications of their framing choices, as they can have long-term consequences on public opinion and democratic processes. Furthermore, it called for more research into the ethical responsibilities of journalists in balancing their framing of political issues. Shah emphasized that media outlets have the responsibility to provide a diverse range of frames and avoid sensationalism, which can lead to biased public opinions. This research also contributed to the broader understanding of the role of media in influencing political campaigns and electoral behavior. Given the findings, it was suggested that media literacy campaigns be introduced to help the public better understand and critically analyze the frames presented to them by news outlets. By fostering a more informed electorate, the democratic process could be strengthened. This study also recommended that more longitudinal studies be conducted to observe how long-term media framing impacts public opinion over multiple electoral cycles. It concluded by affirming the need for media accountability in framing political discourse in a fair and balanced manner.

Valkenburg (2019) examined the impact of news framing on public opinion regarding the refugee crisis in Europe. This study focused on understanding how different types of media frames (positive, negative, or neutral) shaped European public opinion about refugees during the 2015 migrant crisis. The researchers used experimental designs with random assignment of participants to different news frames, which allowed them to measure how each frame influenced participants' views on refugees. Their study revealed that negative news frames, which depicted refugees as threats to national security or economic stability, led to increased public opposition toward refugees and the policies supporting their integration. Conversely, positive frames, which portrayed refugees as victims in need of humanitarian aid, resulted in greater public sympathy and support for refugee policies. Neutral frames, which presented the issue without overt emotional appeals, led to more moderate public reactions but also left the public less informed about the complexities of the issue. These findings underscore the powerful role media plays in influencing public opinion on controversial issues such as immigration and refugee policy. The study recommended that media outlets adopt more positive and neutral frames to balance public perceptions and reduce fear-based responses. Furthermore, suggested that journalists avoid framing refugees solely through negative lenses, which could lead to the stigmatization of these

vulnerable populations. In addition, the study highlighted the importance of framing in promoting social cohesion and tolerance, particularly in multi-ethnic societies. The researchers called for further studies to explore how long-term exposure to specific news frames influences public attitudes and policy outcomes. This study also emphasized the need for media literacy initiatives that could educate the public about the subtle but impactful ways in which media framing shapes perceptions of social issues. Ultimately, concluded that journalists have a significant responsibility in shaping the public's understanding of complex global issues like migration.

McCombs and Shaw (2020) investigated how news coverage of political issues in the media influenced the salience of those issues among the public and how these frames shaped public opinion about the candidates. The study employed content analysis to examine media coverage of key election topics, such as healthcare, immigration, and the economy, alongside public opinion surveys to measure how the public prioritized these issues. Their findings indicated that media framing played a pivotal role in shaping the political agenda by focusing attention on specific issues. For example, the media's framing of healthcare as a key issue in the election led to greater public concern about healthcare reform, with voters indicating a preference for candidates who prioritized healthcare policy. This study also showed that when the media focused on issues like the economy or national security, these topics became more salient in the public's perception of the election. Recommended that media outlets be mindful of the issues they prioritize, as agenda-setting can have a lasting effect on public opinion and the democratic process. The study also called for future research on how media coverage of issues interacts with the political agenda-setting process over the long term. Additionally, suggested that media outlets should strive to provide balanced coverage of important issues to avoid skewing public opinion in favor of one political agenda. The researchers also pointed out the potential risks of media monopolies or concentrated media ownership, which could limit the diversity of perspectives in the framing of public issues. Ultimately, the study emphasized the importance of media literacy to help the public better understand the framing process and its impact on public opinion.

Banas and Soni (2021) explored how different frames in the media influenced public attitudes toward environmental policies, particularly regarding air pollution and climate change. The study used survey experiments, exposing participants to various media frames about the severity of air pollution and its impact on public health. The findings showed that positive frames, which emphasized successful environmental policies and technological solutions, led to greater public support for sustainability initiatives. In contrast, negative frames, which highlighted the dangers of air pollution and the failure of government policies, created skepticism among the public and reduced support for government action. The study also found that neutral frames, which presented the issue without strong emotional appeal, had a moderate effect on public opinion, neither strongly promoting nor discouraging support for environmental policies. Recommended that the media adopt more positive frames when reporting on environmental issues to inspire public participation in sustainability efforts. They also suggested that media outlets should provide more information on potential solutions to environmental problems, as this could foster greater public support for policies aimed at mitigating environmental harm. The study underscored the importance of balanced reporting, particularly on issues as critical as climate change and pollution, which require widespread public cooperation. Additionally, the study highlighted the need for

media outlets to raise awareness about the long-term effects of environmental degradation, encouraging the public to think beyond immediate solutions.

Pew Research Center (2021) examined how media outlets framed the pandemic's severity, the government's response, and public health guidelines. Using content analysis of news coverage from major U.S. outlets and public opinion surveys, the study found that framing the pandemic as a health crisis led to stronger public support for government intervention and lockdown measures. Negative frames, focusing on the economic consequences of lockdowns, led to greater public dissatisfaction, particularly among those economically impacted by the pandemic. The study also revealed that media outlets that framed the issue as a global challenge, emphasizing collective responsibility, garnered more public cooperation with public health measures. Pew Research (2021) recommended that media outlets adopt a consistent and balanced approach to framing health crises, emphasizing both the dangers and the potential solutions to help guide public opinion toward cooperation. Furthermore, the study underscored the role of the media in fostering public trust in government actions during a crisis and encouraged more transparency in reporting. This research emphasized the importance of media framing in times of global crisis, where public opinion can determine the effectiveness of public health measures.

Entman (2019) focused on how media framing influenced public opinion on racial justice issues in the United States, particularly with the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. The study aimed to understand how different media frames contributed to public support or opposition to racial justice reforms. Using qualitative methods and content analysis of news coverage, the study found that negative frames of the Black Lives Matter movement, which portrayed it as disruptive or violent, led to polarized opinions among the public. Positive frames, which emphasized peaceful protests and the movement's calls for social justice, contributed to broader public support for racial justice reforms. The study recommended that the media adopt more neutral or positive frames when covering racial justice issues to promote social cohesion and reduce public hostility. Entman also called for journalists to avoid sensationalizing protests, as this could perpetuate racial stereotypes and deepen divisions. The study suggested that media outlets focus on framing the movement as a call for systemic change, rather than as a series of isolated incidents.

Shin and Kiousis (2018) explored how political news framing affects partisan opinions during election cycles in South Korea. The purpose of the study was to understand how media frames influence the opinions of partisan audiences, particularly in the context of political elections. The study used a panel survey and content analysis to track how participants' opinions on candidates and issues shifted based on the frames they encountered in the media. The findings revealed that partisan media outlets reinforced existing political ideologies, leading to stronger support for candidates aligned with the media's framing. The study also showed that when media outlets framed a candidate as competent or trustworthy, it led to increased support among partisan voters, while negative frames had the opposite effect. Shin and Kiousis recommended that media outlets aim for more balanced and objective framing to avoid further polarizing the electorate. The study also suggested that media literacy programs could help mitigate the effects of partisan media framing. They concluded that media outlets, particularly those with a partisan bias, have a responsibility to provide fair coverage that allows voters to make informed decisions.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low-cost advantage as compared to field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

FINDINGS

The results were analyzed into various research gap categories that is conceptual, contextual and methodological gaps

Conceptual Research Gaps: Banas& Soni (2021) have contributed significantly to understanding how media framing influences public opinion, yet there are several conceptual gaps that require further investigation. For example, while many studies focus on political issues, fewer explore how media framing influences public opinion on social issues such as healthcare, climate change, or racial justice, especially in diverse cultural contexts. Additionally, there is a lack of in-depth research into how different media frames interact with cognitive biases and prior beliefs to influence public opinion. Understanding the psychological mechanisms behind how individuals interpret media frames could enhance the comprehension of framing effects. Furthermore, much of the research has focused on one-time studies or election cycles, and there is a conceptual gap in longitudinal research that looks at how prolonged exposure to specific frames impacts long-term public attitudes and policy preferences. In particular, there is insufficient exploration of how media literacy interventions could help mitigate the effects of biased framing in shaping public opinion.

Contextual Research Gaps: Contextually, most studies have been conducted within Western democracies such as the U.S. and Europe, leaving a gap in research from non-Western or emerging economies. While Altenburg (2019) and Shah (2018) provided valuable insights into the effects of news framing in European and U.S. contexts, research is lacking on how news framing shapes public opinion in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, where political, social, and cultural contexts differ. For instance, how do media frames about issues like refugees, climate change, or governance affect public opinion in countries with less democratic media landscapes or limited media freedom? In addition, contextual studies need to address the impact of news framing on policy outcomes in different socio-political settings. Another gap is the role of new media platforms, such as social media and blogs, which differ in their framing mechanisms compared to traditional media outlets. Studies on framing in digital environments, particularly in non-Western societies, are relatively scarce.

Geographical Research Gaps: Geographically, the majority of framing research has concentrated on the U.S., Europe, and certain parts of Asia. However, there is a significant gap in understanding how media framing affects public opinion in developing and Sub-Saharan African contexts. For example, while studies like those by McCombs and Shaw (2020) have examined media framing in U.S. presidential elections, there is limited research on how media framing in Kenya, Nigeria, or South Africa influences public opinion during national elections or political crises. These regions often have different media systems, levels of press freedom, and political dynamics, which could significantly affect the framing process and its impact on public opinion. Research could also focus on how local media outlets in developing economies use framing to influence the

political discourse around development issues, corruption, or governance. Furthermore, understanding the geographical disparities in media literacy and access to diverse information could shed light on how different populations in emerging economies are susceptible to media framing.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

In conclusion, the effects of news framing on public opinion are profound and multifaceted, influencing how individuals perceive political, social, and economic issues. Research has consistently shown that the way media frames a story whether positive, negative, or neutral can shape public attitudes, influence voting behavior, and even alter policy preferences. Media framing not only determines which aspects of an issue are emphasized but also sets the agenda for public discourse, often guiding the public's focus toward certain topics while sidelining others. As demonstrated in studies like those by Shah (2018) and Valkenburg (2019), framing has the power to mobilize support or stoke opposition, depending on how issues are portrayed. Furthermore, the rise of new media platforms has introduced new dimensions to framing effects, as digital media presents a more fragmented and polarized landscape. However, despite the wealth of research, there remains a need for deeper exploration into the long-term impacts of media framing, particularly in non-Western and developing economies, where media systems and political dynamics differ significantly. To mitigate the negative consequences of biased framing, it is crucial for media outlets to strive for balanced and responsible reporting, emphasizing the ethical responsibilities they hold in shaping public opinion. Finally, the introduction of media literacy programs could empower the public to critically engage with the media, enhancing democratic discourse and fostering more informed public opinion.

Recommendations

Theory

Future research should deepen the theoretical understanding of framing by integrating psychological theories, such as cognitive biases and heuristics, to explore how individual predispositions influence the reception of different news frames. Understanding the interaction between media frames and pre-existing beliefs will enhance the conceptual framework surrounding framing effects. Additionally, researchers could investigate how long-term exposure to media framing shapes not only public opinion but also shifts societal values and norms over time. Given the growing dominance of digital platforms, scholars should extend framing theory to better account for the unique framing mechanisms of social media, where the lines between professional journalism and user-generated content are increasingly blurred. This would include exploring how algorithmic frames shaped by personalized content feeds affect public opinion differently from traditional media outlets.

Practice

Media organizations should prioritize ethical reporting, ensuring that framing does not promote bias or contribute to polarization. Journalists must be aware of the power they hold in shaping public perception and be mindful of the consequences of their framing choices, especially during politically or socially charged events. Media outlets can create guidelines for balanced and fair

framing that encourages diverse perspectives while avoiding sensationalism. Implementing media literacy initiatives is essential in today's information age. Educating the public on how news frames can influence perceptions, behaviors, and opinions will empower individuals to critically evaluate news content. Media literacy programs should be integrated into educational curricula and public awareness campaigns to ensure that individuals are equipped to recognize framing tactics and analyze news with a more informed perspective.

Policy

Policymakers should consider regulating media ownership to prevent monopolization of news sources that could lead to biased or one-sided framing of issues. This would promote a more diverse range of frames in the media, helping to ensure that different societal issues are presented from multiple viewpoints. Additionally, the regulation of digital platforms to prevent algorithmic biases that skew public opinion can foster a more democratic flow of information. Governments and regulatory bodies should advocate for policies that encourage transparency in political news coverage, especially during election cycles. Ensuring that media outlets disclose their framing methods such as their selection of sources or the use of certain rhetorical devices can hold media accountable and improve the public's trust in the media. Policies should also address the issue of "fake news" and misinformation by promoting accurate and responsible journalism, especially in politically sensitive contexts.

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