

# Study on the Reconstruction of the Framing Network in the Digital Media Era

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## ABSTRACT

Digital media has become an increasingly mature platform for news production, information delivering and political participation, and a brand-new digital association field has been formed. This paper analyzes the process and mode of news production and discourse competition in digital communication through framing theory. It discusses the change of hierarchical link and transmission mode of media frame in the digital media era. This paper analyzes the discursive competition at different levels of framework construction. It also pays attention to the possibility of benign coexistence of multiple elements, and the path to enhanced public power. The renewal of framing network modes in the digital media era can trigger people to rethink the concepts of "framing competition" and "public discourse".

**Keywords:** *Media frame, Framing competition, Hierarchical link, Cascade spiral, Discursive community.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The realm of digital media has evolved into a sophisticated platform for creating news, facilitating information exchange, and fostering political engagement. This has given rise to a novel domain within digital communication. As Du Junfei pointed out, one of the essences of the digital age is the integration of people, information, media and society. Communication has become an association, which is a digital practice that combines communication and action [1].

Framing theory can be used to explore the interaction among media, public and public discourse and the hidden laws behind it. It can also be used to analyze the power and resources in news production. In the era of digital media, researchers must evaluate news production and communication, as well as discourse competition in this process. Constructing a framing network model is a typical method to analyze news production and communication processes and the discourse competition in it. Chong and Druckman pointed out: "Framing process model determines the amount of debate on an issue—that is, whether a single frame dominates or there is parity between competing frames [2]." Among them, "Analytical frameworks

like those of 'cascading frame activation' (Entman 2004) or 'market equilibrium' (Baum and Groeling, 2010) have outlined the hierarchical dynamics by which information circulates between policy elites, news media, and the public [3]."

What this paper focuses on is, with the development of information technology and digital media, compared with the traditional news production and framing competition mode, what kind of evolution and structural transformation has occurred in the digital media era? Through this study, we can find out: are the links among different levels and groups of framework construction getting closer? Is framing contest fiercer? Is it helpful in integrating "public discourse"? How can we better understand and explain these changes? How to promote benign multi-group symbiosis in the new environment?

## 2. THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT AND DERIVATION OF FRAMING AND HIERARCHICAL COMPETITION

### 2.1 *Meta-communication: the Concept and Research Field of the Framework*

Framing theory is one of the most cited theoretical concepts and research methods in the field of news communication in the recent 20 years. It presents a diversified development trend, manifested in concept use, research methods and research fields. Framing theory sources include sociology at macro level and cognitive psychology theory at micro level. As Bateson said: "Frame is a kind of meta-communication, and any information, whether clear or implicit, defines a frame." It provides guidance and help to the recipients, enabling them to understand the meaning contained therein. "Framing theory opens up new research possibilities [4]." Reese et al. thinks: "Framing refers to the way events and issues are organized and made sense of, especially by media, media professionals, and their audiences. The framing approach bridges the competing tendencies of social analysis toward closure and openness and may be regarded as one of its strengths [5]."

When "frame" is used, it often refers to two situations: "One is expressed as a frame in communication or a media frame, which involves the choice and emphasis of information transmission of topics or events, while the other is a frame in thought or an individual frame, which

Table 1. Association diagram of basic concepts of framing theory

media frame	frame/ framing	sociology		Psychology/sociology	
		boundary	select and highlight	Cognitive resources	cognition
individual frame		construction	explain	Cognitive structure	

### 2.2 *Competition of Power and Resources in the Media Framing*

Framing theory can be used to explore the interaction between media, public and public discourse and the hidden laws behind it. It can also be used to analyze power and resources in news production. This kind of research focuses on the media frame and the broader political power relationship. It reminds people that framing contest is not a "fair and reasonable" field, and frame builders are the actors who exert power and

involves the audience's cognitive understanding of events".

"When one encounters the mass media, it is rarely if ever with a blank mind. We carry around with us certain cognitive structures that we use actively to make sense of what we are receiving [6]." Neisser calls such cognitive structures *schemata*. A schema provides an initial expectation, an anticipation of what one is going to see [7].

This paper concludes that, whether from the perspective of psychology or sociology, framing is essentially a process in which "cognitive construction subjects" (actors) allocate "cognitive resources", shape "cognitive structure" and influence "cognitive subjects" (interactive parties). It is a process of grabbing cognitive resources and sculpting cognitive structure for different communicators. "Cognitive resources" include "materials used for screening and organizing", "premises and rules for observing materials" and "people/elements that influence the process and rules of observing materials", which are like frames, drawing the boundaries between the inside and the outside. "Cognitive structure" includes "the basic interpretation model" and "some understanding, thinking or perspective". Like spears and shields, "cognitive structure" is not only influenced by actors' framework, but also by the "cognitive rationality" of interactive parties, that is, intellectual ability. People's "cognitive rationality" is limited, but developable. In the digital environments, actors and interactive parties have a more convenient and diverse process and path. ("Table 1")

influence. Du Junfei thinks: "How people's existing cognition of media and information interacts with the external environment is the focus of the framing theory. This includes both the tension between the sender and the receiver and the tension between the text and society [8].

There are similarities between "frame" and "hegemony". In both cases, they pay attention to the implicit, naturalized and inherent aspects of thinking and behavior. In the theory of cultural hegemony, leadership not only expresses the interests of the ruling class, but also permeates the

consciousness of the masses. Leadership is accepted as "normal reality" or "common sense" by the subordinate classes or the masses. Cultural hegemony can explain news production and frame construction. When hegemony is constantly adjusted and changed with the environment, the media framework is also adjusted and changed. This is done to jointly create a new cultural hegemony that conforms to the core interests. Framing is the integration of public discourse, and participants' "framing potential" is different, including the degree of proximity and control to cognitive resources, the degree of perfection of cognitive structure, etc. Frame construction at any level is not neutral. Only when it meets the standards of experience credibility and discussion loyalty can it resonate with other actors and affect cognition.

Li Xiguang said: "The media frame is an invisible hand that controls the news behind the scenes. The media frame is to make news report coherent and logical, which is more attractive to readers, but it also reflects journalists' prejudice. To some extent, the media frame replicates the conceptual, ideology and knowledge framework. Relatively speaking, the framework research field of analyzing the power and source in news production has not been paid attention to some extent [9]. Carragee & Roefs once pointed out that "a number of trends in framing research have neglected the relationship between media frames and broader issues of political and social power. They concluded that framing research needs to be linked to the political and social questions, regarding power central to the media hegemony thesis, and illustrate this focus by exploring how framing research can contribute to an understanding of the interaction between social movements and the news media [10]."

### ***2.3 Framing Networks and Discourse Competition***

Classical theories about communication direction include agenda setting and multilevel communication theory. Agenda setting describes the ability of the news media to influence public discussion topics. It holds that the media's agenda setting is driven by prejudice about politics, the economy and culture. The bipolar communication model points out that information flows from mass media to opinion leaders, and then to the public. It holds that mass communication affects people's cognitive stage, while interpersonal communication

has a greater influence on persuasion and decision-making. With the development of communication technology and society, the multilevel communication model has revised the dimension of social influence, thinking that information is influenced by social norms at various levels and groups. The transmission process of information among the general public is a multi-step diffusion system, and there are often several levels of "opinion leaders" from the information source to the audience.

Some scholars have suggested that agenda setting theory and framing theory can be combined, but more scholars do not support this confluence. Du Tao comprehensively analyzed the frontiers of Chinese and Western studies. He found that the two theories have their own methodology systems, but they can refer to each other in specific ways [11]. Compared with agenda setting, framing includes a broader and deeper cognitive process, pays more attention to the organizational characteristics of media information and the flow of social power, considers the media presentation of issues and the clues to structural decision-making, and analyzes the relationship between micro-elements and the macro-world. Scholars have also achieved fruitful results in this field. In this research field, many people critically analyze the power and manipulation of socially advantageous groups in the framing competition. They worry about the risks it may bring to a democratic society.

With regard to the influencing factors and structure of news frames, Shoemaker et al. put forward a "Hierarchical Influences Model", comprising five levels of influence on media content from the macro to micro levels: social systems, social institutions, media organizations, routine practices, and individuals [12].

With traditional media, news is a one-way message, with the government and mainstream media framing it. In 2003, Entman used "cascade" as a metaphor in his research, and put forward a link model of communication at different levels [13]. This model complements research using hegemony or indexing methods. It explains how the framework is activated from the top and spread to news organizations and the public. In English, "cascade" has both the meaning of "waterfall" from top to bottom and the meaning of "layering and cascading", so this metaphor can accurately reflect the difference and layering of communication power.

Entman believes at least in America, the framing ability is highly differentiated and flows in a "cascade" style, features a series of networks organized into a clear hierarchy. The mass citizen has a weak influence on transmitting ideas from bottom to top, which is described as "noise".

Entman's cascade model has considerable advantages, which take into account many actors trying to exert influence on the communication process. As Chong and Druckman found, "Entman's cascade model serves as a provocative baseline on which others might build [13]." At the same time, it pays less attention to the mass and has room for further research. As Gamson said, "The role of social movements and of citizens as collective actors in framing contests largely disappears in Entman's model [14]."

In 2012, Entman once again mentioned in his book *Scandal and Silence: Media's Response to President's Misconduct* that "At least through 2008, information on the Internet made little difference on politics unless the traditional media opened their gates [15]."

This paper finds that previous multi-level communication theories often focused on whether the audience gets information from mainstream media or social media, but often ignored the interaction between mainstream media and social media and the two-way position of opinion leaders. They paid little attention and gave limited trust to public, but focused on studying how frames in the communications of elites influence citizens' attitudes. This process is typically called a framing effect. At the same time, profound changes have occurred in the communication environment in the digital age. These changes include the increasingly scattered and fragmented "information commons" and increasingly serious political polarization. Digital age changes make it urgent for scholars to improve theoretical models, comparative methods and empirical research paths. The present situation of framing competition and the mode of hierarchical link are imaginative topics.

### **3. RECONSTRUCTURE OF THE HIERARCHICAL LINK MODE OF FRAMING NETWORK IN THE DIGITAL MEDIA ERA**

The self-breathing ability, fertility, monitoring power and ecological dimension of digital media information dissemination are all causing the transformation of overall media power, which has

triggered the redistribution of cognitive resources and structures and the transformation of cognitive construction subjects.

In the digital media environment, it is unclear whether all levels can achieve coordinated, balanced and sustainable development between technology grant and deprivation. It is necessary to study the status quo of framing competition and hierarchical link mode in the digital age, and to investigate the changes in the direction and mode of hierarchical link and the changes in the public discourse integration of digital media.

#### **3.1 The "Cascade" Spiral: Framing Reverse Link Activation**

With the development of social media, more and more people become online news citizens. There are still risks of "commercialization of the audience" and "tyranny of the majority" in society. The former is the erosion of society's overall rational cognitive structure by excessive power agency. The latter is the rude abuse of cognitive resources by new cognitive subjects. At the same time, public power is also facing the crisis of continuous reduction. Field differentiation and independent field norms in contemporary society often isolate elite politics' moral norms from the daily life of the masses. The masses often feel powerless, unwilling and alienated when faced with increasingly large and professional social norms.

However, more and more empirical research supports digital technology's opportunities to enhance the public discourse. There are frequent cases and situations in which relatively weak framing level play a significant role in framing competitions. By activating the reverse link of framing, the public make the break through to become the main body and initiator of framing.

There are many empirical studies in this field, including the comparison of frameworks and interaction between online and offline public opinion. Zhou and Moy studied the interactive relationship between online public opinion framework and traditional media framework. They analyzed 206 online posts and 114 traditional media reports on China's "BMW Crash Case" in 2003. They divided the online discourse into three stages, and studied and tested the correlation and causality between the public opinion framework and the media framework significance. It is found that online public opinion has played a significant role in transforming a local event into a national event.

It has also played a significant role in framing subsequent media reports, but only at the initial stage of reporting. Network public opinion framework and media framework form the framing interaction effect. The government has a significant influence on the framework construction process, but the potential autonomy of netizens weakens the framework setting effect of the government [16]. Yi Hong Fa studied the relationship among personal agenda, media agenda and public agenda. It is believed that the so-called public agenda cannot replace the diversity of personal agendas in the Internet age, and Twitter's public agenda has strong consistency with the media agenda [17].

In 2018, Entman and Nikki revised the cascading network activation model of frame activation and spread, developed before digital media's rise. By the model, they research on whether they flatten and democratize hierarchies of information control and power or entrench dominant structures, and abstractly considered and agreed that network-level chain activation fosters an environment that challenges the top-level framework design. However, the overall orientation of the five key factors involved is that the public will accept the upper-level frame setting more easily, rather than improving the public's framing ability [18].

As reflected by the "cascade" model and the revised model proposed by Entman, many pessimists believe that the gap between mass consciousness and the elite in the social media environment is widening, and the possibility of the mass being manipulated is expanding.

Entman's research background is the United States, and the representative democracy system in the United States is the harmony between elite rule and people's sovereignty, trying to protect and restrict public participation, but in fact this has caused the elite to be at the top of the framework. At the same time, 2018 is the second year of the "post-truth" era, and the political situation in the United States is complicated.

Entman and Usher urge future researchers to pay more academic attention to the audience and consider the profound changes in the digital media environment as a whole [18]. Taking this as a starting point, this paper will further explore the multiple dimensions of framing competition.

Way of thinking about communication can be developed as a focus on communication as a constitutive process rather than an informational

one [19]. In the social media environment, the public can participate in the framing process as the subject of cognitive construction in public affairs and can actively use a large number of accessible cognitive resources to form a cognitive structure. Cognitive resources and structures have produced new opportunities for convergence and extension, and mass communication power has been improved. At the same time, there are two possibilities, mass rationality promotes democracy, or the masses are used to form violent populism. This paper holds that digital technology plays a crucial role in the integration of public discourse. The rising path of mass framing power is mainly as follows.

### *3.1.1 The Priming Effect of Public Framing*

The primary link in framing is the source that influences the media agenda. News sources have a strong influence on media content. News sources may publish facts or prejudiced opinions. Relying on the advantages of information sources and processors, digital media has been endowed with the ability of Priming, making some topics or attributes more prominent or accessible. In the process of public discourse integration, the priming effect can be a positive one, such as forming discourse cluster support. It can also be negative priming, such as provoking and gathering opposition.

Through social media, journalists and other citizens contribute significantly to the framing process. Including managing followers, tracking hot topics, creating topic tags, forming discourse clusters, etc. Once launched, online tags will soon show their own information source characteristics and realize two key things: (1) These tags create a shared audience experience, allow real-time and collective comments and discussions, and make it possible for the public to participate in event evaluation extensively; (2) Labels provide a space for public discussion and enhance the willingness and ability of discussants to participate; These tags can also be linked to other media platforms, resulting in influence and interaction between different media.

Mainstream media journalists also often use online media-related accounts as sources for news reports. More than nine-in-ten journalists in the United States (94%) use social media for their jobs, according to a recent Pew Research Center survey of reporters, editors and others working in the news industry [20]. In the interaction between social

media and mainstream media, mainstream media obtains all kinds of information. At the same time, because of its huge and partially reliable news source, social media has also gained the credibility of the mainstream media. This has expanded its influence. With time, this has had a profound impact on public discourse integration.

### *3.1.2 Breakthrough to Become Framing Subjectivity*

Citizens of online news are not only reprinting information; they are also frame builders. Expression and debate help people uncover the truth and pursue it. As Arendt represents it, Socrates believed that “nobody can know by himself and without further effort the inherent truth of his own opinion [21].” Boyle and Pardun found that “In every country, the preponderance of sources making comments were individuals, ‘everyday citizens’ with no professional affiliation or public persona [22].” Margolis and Mauser predicted that “if citizen groups use these media to develop their own information networks and to organize politically, they will enhance their capacity to constrain or control those elites. Public opinion really will make a difference [23].”

This paper holds that in the era of digital media, although information is complicated and prone to tendentiousness, the expressive ability that can touch all sectors of society is equally powerful, and the right to know and the right to express overlap to a certain extent. Public discourse output is more complicated, which restricts political elites' ability to integrate public discourse. The public has become the subject of cognitive construction subversively, exercising the right to expression including information transmission, opinion expression, social debate and action mobilization. Social media ensures citizens' privacy and convenience, helps the public participate in power in complex daily life, and advances from an ecological position.

## *3.2 "Discursive" and "Connection": the Dynamic Framing Network*

In the era of digital media, there is more overlap and interaction in the framing competition of different discourse power levels. This brings opportunities and crises for mass framing power promotion. This paper believes that it is critical to take into account the "discursive" and "connection"

characteristics of the framing network and the hierarchical links mode when updating them.

As Knüpfer analyzed, many previous studies on frame competition did not consider structural division, organizational differences and power reorganization in the process of frame construction. The resulting model of frame competition is based on the premise that political actors compete in a common space. These have focused on the differences these environments afford to specific forms of communication and how these may be generally advantageous to specific actors, issues or frames [3].

This paper argues that in the “discursive” media environment, the framework is constantly modified, restated, and spread at different levels. This features subjective pluralism, iterative creation, and fluidity. Therefore, scholars must analyze the influence of the changes in the form and field of interaction at all levels and the changes in the framework interaction mode on the construction of a pluralistic and harmonious media environment.

### *3.2.1 Change of Framing Interaction Mode and Space*

In the realm of framing competition, the symbiotic relationship between vertical and horizontal transmission modes is increasingly evident. This dynamic introduces new dimensions to competitive interactions across different levels. Adaptations in strategies occur as framing abilities evolve due to horizontal transmission modes. Horizontal transmission, emphasizing negotiation, can mitigate power conflicts in the vertical mode while enhancing cross-level opinion exchange. Simultaneously, it may collaborate with vertical transmission to intensify power struggles. The evolution of framing competitions, transitioning from vertical to horizontal, extends into shared public spheres, navigating dynamic and overlapping hierarchies. The formidable hierarchy in framing molds audience cognition through superior resources. In the digital media landscape, public access to information challenges cognitive boundaries, yet the fragmented news environment empowers framing levels to selectively use mass framework networks, shaping narratives and potentially isolating public perceptions. Strong framing levels predict frame effects, constructing vague discourses in transparent media fields, allowing later content edits. In fragmented news environments, observing framing competition necessitates integrating all stages, risking the

public's autonomy in truth-seeking and critical evaluation, while also offering opportunities for mass-driven counter-effects. Uitermarka et al. develop a network method to identify groups forming through discursive contentious interactions as well as relational measures of polarization, leadership, solidarity, and various aspects of discursive power. They find a recurrent pattern: a small yet cohesive group of challengers with strong discursive leaders forces their framing of integration issues upon other participants. They suggest that the pattern may exemplify a more universal network pattern behind discursive contention [24].

### 3.2.2 "Discursive Community"

In English, "discursive" denotes a non-hierarchical, linking nature. Scholars apply it across communication fields. This paper contends that, in early public domain classification, "discursive" aptly combines communication with a fitting connotation.

In the discussion of the public sphere of modern democracy, public sphere theory is often divided into four models, namely "representative liberal", "participatory liberal", "discursive" and "constructionist"[25]. Distinguishing between "participation freestyle" and "discursive" is challenging, as both advocate equal public inclusion. However, "discursive" stresses decisions after extensive public discussion, emphasizing diverse communication and respectful consideration of varying views, highlighting the characteristics of discussion, negotiation, argument, and struggle in discourse

Those who share such conventions and tacit rules are said to be in the same "discursive community, "a historical moment of a social aggregate, which functions as a basis for collective action [26].

These studies demonstrate that each category of actors in public deliberation employs the established and shared conventions and norms. As a result, their framing efforts reproduce themselves as a "discursive community." Some of those norms and conventions are found in the well-understood work routines of a profession or community. Whereas some of those norms and conventions may be stabilized as formal, even codified bureaucratic procedures and rules, others may exist as tacit expectations, which in some communities may be repeatedly discussed or "talked about [27]".

In conclusion, this paper supports the notion that "discursive" refers to a loosely connected, temporary set capable of collective action in deliberative politics through discussion, consultation, and defense. In the social media landscape, the public sphere has shifted from point to point, enabling fluid transitions between public and private spaces, intensifying elite stratification, and facilitating spontaneous communication functions. The discursive nature promotes diverse alliances with increased speed, width, and flexibility. However, this also results in a divided perception of reality, allowing elite and mainstream media to enhance framework construction, capturing audience preferences. In the digital media era, diverse and discordant discourse builders, along with unclear gatekeeper boundaries, contribute to a more complex and discursive landscape. Traditional media frameworks may transform into opinion leaders or gatekeepers of smaller groups, further complicating the situation.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Public discourse integration in the digital age calls for pluralistic and benign cooperation. From a global perspective, how to define and structure what people see and hear, how to have enough cognitive ability to form a reasonable cognitive structure, and how to systematically ensure to convey or represent real public opinion are the keys to the future development of social media and the entire media environment.

Competition forms and wrestling results of different levels of framework power are open and can be explored. This paper holds that: from the moral level, it depends on the extent to which mass intellectual development is promoted; From the legal level, it depends on the perfection and protection of the national social legal system.

The digital age demands an increased demand for media literacy. This is, the ability to use various forms of digital media to obtain, analyze, construct news information, and then act. Hobbs et al. and others emphasize the importance of citizens' digital media literacy: "New skills are needed for accessing, analyzing, evaluating, creating, and distributing messages within a digital, global, and democratic society [28]." There is considerable debate among educators about how much media literacy should be paid attention to popular culture.

This paper contends that, beyond digital literacy, the public must enhance digital intelligence,

denoting the capacity to judiciously handle emotional stimuli, morally engage with diverse opinions, and value the right to self-expression in the digital age. Legal considerations for safeguarding and shaping public discourse have evolved from traditional to social media eras. Globally, these considerations include whether social media companies should oversee politicians, whether they should be regulated regarding government actions, legal protection for public comments on social platforms, and safeguarding journalists, cyber citizens, and information sources.

The framing network models, originally designed to elucidate relationship networks and dimensions in politics, face obsolescence in the wake of digital technology's transformative impact on traditional relationships and space-time characteristics. This study shifts focus to the profound changes in the digital media environment, particularly emphasizing the role of the audience. In the digital era, framing competition involves overlapping interactions among different discourse power levels, presenting both opportunities and crises for mass framing power promotion. The public emerges as a key player in frame construction, contributing to cognitive structures and resources, thereby influencing mass communication power. However, this empowerment brings forth the dual potential of promoting democracy through mass rationality or fueling violent populism.

The discursive media environment witnesses constant modification and restatement of media frameworks across various levels. The symbiotic relationship between vertical and horizontal transmission modes, compounded by media fragmentation, extends framing competition into diverse shared environments with dynamic and overlapping hierarchical structures. The digital media landscape exhibits a "discursive" and "connected" network framework, allowing the public to navigate between private and public spaces, intensifying elite stratification and grouping. Simultaneously, the digital era introduces diverse and discordant discourse builders, blurring the boundaries among gatekeepers and increasing the accuracy of personal media channel choices. Traditional media and elite frameworks may transform into opinion leaders or gatekeepers within smaller groups, contributing to a more complex and discursive landscape.

The evolution of media development demands a multi-link and cooperative communication

spectrum, balancing competition at all communication levels, achieving a natural equilibrium, and cultivating a moderate and diverse public. Researchers must navigate between positive optimism and acknowledgment of political, economic, and cultural inequalities to comprehend and address these dynamics effectively.

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