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Why It Matters How We Frame the Environment
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Ubiquity

Environmental framing is everywhere in the news. I am writing this on October 11, 2009. Today's NY Times has two typical and interesting examples. The first is from Jonathan's Safran Foer in the Magazine, p. 74.

According to reports by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the U.N., factory farming has made animal agriculture the No. 1 contributor to global warming (it is significantly more destructive than transportation alone) , and one of the Top 2 or 3 causes of all of the most serious environmental problems: air and water pollution, deforestation, loss of biodiversity, ... Eating factory-farmed animals — which is to say virtually every piece of meat sold in supermarkets and prepared in restaurants — is almost certainly the single worst thing that human do to the environment.

Turning to the op-ed section, one comes across an odd couple, John Kerry and Lindsay Graham, Massachusetts liberal and South Carolina conservative, writing 'hopefully' on bipartisan climate change legislation.

...we are advocating aggressive reductions in our emissions of carbon gases ... without hindering global competitiveness or driving more jobs overseas ... we must also take advantage of nuclear power, our single largest contributor of emissions-free power ... jettison cumbersome regulations that have stalled the construction of nuclear plants ... encourage serious investment in research to find solutions to our nuclear waste problem ... for the foreseeable future we will continue to burn fossil fuels ... The United States should aim to become the Saudi Arabia of clean coal ... we are committed to seeking compromise on additional onshore and offshore gas exploration ... Failure to act comes with another cost ... the administration will use the Environmental Protection Agency to

impose new regulations .. likely to be tougher .. Industry needs the certainty that comes with Congressional action ... we will pass on to future generations a strong economy, a clean environment, and an energy-independent nation.

And looking back to the past, we find these quotes from a 2003 language advisory by Frank Luntz to the Bush administration, called *Winning the Global Warming Debate: An Overview* :

It's time for us to start talking about "climate change" instead of global warming ... "Climate change" is less frightening than "global warming" ... Stringent environmental regulations hit the most vulnerable among us - the elderly, the poor and those on fixed incomes - the hardest ... Job losses ... greater costs.. "American corporations and industry can meet any challenge," "we produce the majority of the world's food, ... yet we produce a fraction of the world's pollution" ...

Luntz' memo was the beginning of the use of "climate change." The idea was that "climate" had a nice connotation – more swaying palm trees and less Hurricane Katrina. "Change" left out any human cause of the change. Climate just changed. No one to blame.

In the Luntz memo, we see the roots of the conservative discourse used in the Kerry-Graham op-ed: tough EPA regulations would hurt the vulnerable and create job losses. And the use of language suggests the opposite of the UN report that Foer quotes, that our methods of food production produces only "a fraction of the world's pollution," which sounds like "a small, insignificant fraction" with insignificant effects. And, given the conservative perspective that Kerry and Graham take, it is no surprise that they do not mention what Foer says about animal agriculture.

If you are at all sensitive to framing, examples like this jump out at you every day. What are we to make of this flood of examples?

What is Framing?

One of the major results in the cognitive and brain sciences is that we think in terms of typically unconscious structures called "frames" (sometimes "schemas"). Frames include semantic roles,

relations between roles, and relations to other frames. A hospital frame, for example, includes the roles Doctor, Nurse, Patient, Visitor, Receptionist, Operating Room, Recovery Room, Scalpel, etc. Among the relations are specifications of what happens in a hospital, e.g., Doctors operate on Patients in Operating Rooms with Scalpels. These structures are physically realized in neural circuits in the brain. All of our knowledge makes use of frames, and every word is defined through the frames it neurally activates. All thinking and talking involves “framing.” And since frames come in systems, a single word typically activates not only its defining frame, but also much of the system its defining frame is in.

Moreover, many frame-circuits have direct connections to the emotional regions of the brain. Emotions are an inescapable part of normal thought. Indeed, you cannot be rational without emotions. Without emotion, you would not know what to want, since like and not-like would be meaningless to you. When there is no like or not-like, nor any judgment of the emotional reactions of others, you cannot make rational decisions.

Since political ideologies are, of course, characterized by systems of frames, ideological language will activate that ideological system. Since the synapses in neural circuits are made stronger the more they are activated, the repetition of ideological language will strengthen the circuits for that ideology in a hearer’s brain. And since language that is repeated very often becomes “normally used” language, ideological language repeated often enough can become “normal language” but still activate that ideology unconsciously in the brains of citizens — and journalists.

In short, one cannot avoid framing. The only question is, whose frames are being activated — and hence strengthened — in the brains of the public.

There are limited possibilities for changing frames. Introducing new language is not always possible. The new language must make sense in terms of the existing system of frames. It must work emotionally. And it must be introduced in a communication system that allows for sufficient spread over the population, sufficient repetition, and sufficient trust in the messengers.

And, of course, negating a frame just activates the frame, as when Nixon said, “I am not a crook” and everyone thought of him as crook. When President Obama said that he had no intention of a “government takeover,” he was activating the government-takeover frame.

These are some of the properties of Real Reason, the way we really reason.

The Trap of Enlightenment Reason

Most of us were brought up with a commonplace view of how we think that derives from the Enlightenment. Over the past 30 years, the cognitive and brain sciences has shown that this view is false. The old view claimed that reason is conscious, unemotional, logical, abstract, universal, with concepts and language able to fit the world directly. All of that is false. Real reason is mostly unconscious (98 percent); requires emotion; uses the 'logic' of frames, metaphors, and narratives; is physical (in brain circuitry); varies considerably, as frames vary; and since the brain is set up to run a body, ideas and language can't directly fit the world but rather must go through the body.

This matters, because many people engaged in environmentalism still have the old, false view of reason and language. Folks trained in public policy, science, economics, and law are often given the old, false view. As a result, they may believe that if you just tell people the facts, they will reason to the right conclusion. What actually happens is that the facts must make sense in terms of their system of frames, or they will be ignored. The facts, to be communicated, must be framed properly.

Furthermore, to understand something complex, a person must have a system of frames in place that can make sense of the facts. In the case of global warming, all too many people do not have such a system of frames in the conceptual systems in their brains. Such frame systems have to be built up over a period of time. This has not been done.

How to Misunderstand "Framing"

Words are defined relative to frames, and hearing a word can activate its frame — and the frames in its system — in the brain of a hearer. Words themselves are not frames. But under the right conditions, words can be chosen to activate desired frames. This is what effective communicators do. In order to communicate a complex fact or a complex truth, one must choose one's words carefully to activate the right frames so that the truth can be understood. If the hearer has no such frames, then you have choose your words carefully to build up those frames. That is what I am doing in this essay, for readers who are not familiar with frames, or with the cognitive science behind the study of framing. In order to communicate truths about framing, I have to provide you with a narrative that builds up an appropriate system of frames in your mind.

Have you ever wondered why conservatives can communicate easily in a few words, while liberals take paragraphs. The reason is that conservatives have spent decades, day after day building up frames in people's brains, and building a better communication system to get their ideas out in public. Progressives have not done that. As a result they have a hard building up the appropriate system of frames from scratch. And if they make the mistake of thinking that words are frames, they will assume that all they need are the right words or slogans.

This mistake lay behind EcoAmerica's hiring of Drew Westen and Celinda Lake to give them some new words and slogans to "reframe" global warming. Now Drew and Celinda did give them some sage advice: to talk about values, not just facts and figures; to use simple language, not technical terms; to appeal to emotions. But in the absence of systems of frames built up over a long period, the words and slogans could probably not do much, though they might be an improvement.

The same mistake has been made by PRAXIS Forum in the instructions I received to write this paper. PRAXIS Forum misframed the issue. Here is an example of questions I was to address.

Some say focusing on language, visual rhetoric, or communication more broadly distracts people from "the real crisis" of global climate change. Do you believe there is any ethical, political, or conceptual risk in a communicative approach to global climate change? Conversely, do you believe there is any ethical, political, or conceptual risk in ignoring a communicative approach to global climate change?

Environmental frames are the (typically unconscious) conceptual structures that people have in their brain circuitry to understand environmental issues. To understand "the real crises" one needs the right conceptual structures in one's brain circuitry. Frames are communicated via language and visual imagery. The right language is absolutely necessary for communicating "the real crisis." However, most people do not have the overall background system of frames needed to understand "the real crisis," simply providing a few words and slogans can at best help a very little.

But the framing problems are even more profound. Many people have in their brain circuitry the wrong frames for understanding "the real crisis." That is, they have frames that would either contradict the right frames, or lead them to ignore the relevant facts. Those wrong frames don't go away. You can't just present the relevant facts and have everyone erase significant circuitry in their brains. Brains don't work that way. What is needed is a constant effort to build up the

background frames needed to understand the crisis, while building up neural circuitry to inhibit the wrong frames. That is anything but a simple, short-term job to be done by a few words or slogans.

Yet the communications teams for environmental NGO's, the EPA, the think tanks, and Congress have to have something to say by next week — or tomorrow! They need words and slogans now! And so they see framing as a short-term messaging issue.

If that weren't bad enough, the problem is even worse. It's not just a matter of understanding "the real crisis." It's understanding what to do about it. And choosing the right policies means understanding those policies and how they are supposed to work. This is an incredibly complicated matter, and in many cases the right frames for understanding policy have not even been figured out.

Messaging

I wish I could tell you that just getting a few of the words and slogans better by next week would change the world environmentally and win the culture wars. But what I have been saying for years is that it is harder than that. There are many things that have to be done at once on the messagee front.

First, progressives need a much better communications system. In addition to serious framing research institutes, such a system needs training facilities, a system of spokespeople in every electoral district, and bookers to get them booked in the media.

Second, there needs to be cognitive policy in addition to material policy. That means planning the frames that are needed in the long run, as well as those needed to battle the right on issues of the day. The effectiveness of short-term frames depends on the prior effectiveness of long term frames.

Third, framing institutes are about much more than language. They are about the kinds of things discussed in this paper. What framing gaps are there and how do we fill them. How can the right frames get institutionalized? How can an understanding of framing guide policy?

Fourth, there are everyday helpful hints:

Talk at the level of values, and frame issues in terms of moral values. Distinguish values from policies. Always go on offense, never defense. Never accept the right's frames – don't negate

them, or repeat them, or structure your arguments to counter them. That just activates their frames in the brain and helps them.

Provide a structured understanding of what you are saying. Don't give laundry lists. Tell stories that exemplify your values and rouse emotions. Don't just give numbers and material facts without framing them so their overall significance can be understood. Instead find general themes or narratives that incorporate the points you need to make.

Context matters: be aware of what's going on. Address everyday concerns. Avoid technical jargon; use words people can understand. The messenger matters. Visuals matter. Body language matters.

The EcoAmerica Report.

The EcoAmerica Report got some of these helpful hints right, and at least deserves credit for that. But, as Mark Mellman pointed out in his critique (<http://climateprogress.org/2009/05/13/mark-mellman-climate-messaging-ecoamerica/>), the report also violated some of the basic principles of short-term messaging.

The main problem with the EcoAmerica report was that it did not address either the deep or long-term issues. It was written as if short-term messaging would win the day, even in the absence of prior effective long-term messaging and a serious communications system.

Framing for an Environmental Movement

Successful social movements require the coherence provided by coherent framing. Think of the union movement, the anti-war (or peace) movement, the civil rights movement, the feminist movement. The basic ideas are simple and straightforward.

Unions: Because companies have much more power over individual workers in matters of pay, benefits, and working conditions, workers need to join together in unions to equalize that power.

Civil rights: African-Americans have been denied a wide range of civil rights and should have them.

Feminism: Women have been relegated to inferior positions in society and deserve equality in those areas.

The same should be true of environmentalism.

Environmentalism: The natural world is being destroyed and it is a moral imperative to preserve and reconstitute as much of it as possible as soon as possible.

Of course, in each case complexities have arisen, along with powerful reactions. The details are enormously complex in each, as they are in environmentalism. But what has made social movements effective is a simple basic framing.

The social movement approach is idealistic of necessity. Idealism mobilizes. And it throws a light on, and presents a counterweight to, moral compromise. The media reports mainly on political compromise, as exemplified by the Kerry-Graham quote we started with. Without a clearly framed social movement, the moral compromise behind the political compromise can be hidden.

Truth must be framed effectively to be seen at all. That is why an understanding of framing matters.

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