

Knowledge Into Action

Framing the Debates Over Climate Change and Poverty

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In February 2008, I appeared on a panel about news coverage of climate change at the meetings of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). Close to 300 attendees packed the convention hall, including journalists, scientists, and science policy advocates. The sense of urgency in the room was electric. Historically, these groups have played separate, though complementary communication roles, but on climate change traditional boundaries no longer appeared to apply. Regardless of their professional background, the great majority of attendees wanted to understand how to use the media to motivate and empower citizens to actively participate in policy debates over climate change.

Yet despite this common purpose, most of the discussion focused on a well-intentioned but incomplete strategy for achieving this shared communication goal. Journalists, scientists, and advocates alike defined the way forward as “covering the science of climate change better” and “getting more coverage of climate science” out to the public. If the public only better understood the science of climate change, reasoned many attendees, then they would view the urgency of the problem as experts do. As I explain in this chapter, this misplaced line of thinking was unfortunately predictable, deriving from decades-old false assumptions among journalists, advocates, and scientists about how to effectively engage the public on pressing social problems.

As limited as climate change communication assumptions might be, the debate over how to effectively engage the public on solutions to domestic poverty borders on the divisive. In fact, even the label *poverty*, used as a collective umbrella term to refer to issues related to income disparity, low wage work, and quality jobs, remains contested. Moreover, the stories and meanings that many journalists and advocates believe are effective at building public concern and consensus—what has been called a “sympathy for the poor” frame—may actually reinforce harmful stereotypes and false beliefs.

Almost a year before the AAAS meeting, in the spring of 2007, I was invited to participate in a roundtable discussion at the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC, on the use of documentary film campaigns to mobilize the public around complex policy problems.¹ After the meeting, I was approached by Margy Waller, director of the nonpartisan Mobility Agenda. In her work, Waller had been drawing upon framing research to communicate about poverty in new ways. Yet while she often discovered a receptive audience for these innovative strategies among state-level and community-based groups, in the nation's capital she found that major advocacy coalitions were still locked in a decades-old language of "poverty." Hoping to shape this internal struggle among progressive organizations over communication strategy, Waller commissioned me to author an analysis of how framing research can be applied to the topic.

This chapter is intended as a primer for practitioners—journalists, experts, or advocates—who wish to understand what it takes to break through the perceptual paralysis that plagues complex policy problems. Drawing on insights from my research and experience working with a variety of organizations, experts, and journalists, my goal is to translate past research on framing and media influence into meaningful communication principles, using the case studies of climate change and poverty as examples.

My recommendations in this chapter derive from a fairly basic premise: To overcome the communication barriers of human nature, partisan identity, and media fragmentation requires tailoring messages to a specific medium and audience, using carefully researched metaphors, allusions, and examples that trigger a new way of thinking about the personal relevance of a gridlocked problem. Whether it is climate change, poverty, or another issue, the public and policymakers require frameworks for connecting the dots on otherwise apparently isolated events, trends, and policy solutions. Applying research on framing to help individuals and groups see clearly the linkages between their everyday lives, their specific values, and these problems is by no means a magical key to catalyzing action, but it is a first step. This chapter offers a few modest ways forward.

Why Framing Matters

As I review in this chapter, framing is an unavoidable reality of the public communication process. The choice as a journalist, expert, or advocate is not whether to employ framing, but rather how to effectively frame a message for your audience. From many conversations and talks on the topic, I know that some journalists and experts are likely to read the recommendations in this chapter and dismiss them as out of bounds, preferring to follow perceived traditions of "objectivity," "impartiality,"

and “neutrality.” Though the meaning and usefulness of these norms have always been debated, they are perhaps even more challenged in today’s world, where pressing problems such as climate change are decided within a dramatically different media and political landscape from just a decade ago.

While traditionalists among journalists and experts may be slow to apply lessons from framing research, an avant-garde among these groups are pushing ahead with innovative approaches. Confronted by a profusion of think tanks and disinformation campaigns, many journalists are actively seeking ways to move beyond the trap of “false balance,” even if it cuts against conventional definitions of objectivity or independence (Cunningham, 2003; Mooney, 2004). This shift has occurred in part out of professional necessity, as many veteran reporters have been forced to leave their jobs at major news organizations while early career journalists encounter limited job prospects (Russell, 2006). As an alternative career path, some journalists have joined with universities or foundations to forge a new brand of not-for-profit journalism where reporting and commentary merge in outlets such as blogs, interactive Web sites, books, and documentary films. The focus at these outlets is not only to inform but also to alert and mobilize the public, with media produced in collaboration with scientists, experts, and nonpartisan advocacy groups (Brainard, 2008; Lewis, 2007). In other initiatives, leading organizations, such as the National Academies, have already put framing theory and principles into practice, commissioning audience research to inform the framing of their background materials and public outreach on the teaching of evolution in schools (Nisbet, 2009a).

Of course, if research on framing is transformed into a communication technology and strategy, it needs to be used responsibly. Journalists, experts, and advocates alike must respect the uncertainty that is inherent to any technical question and resist engaging in hyperbole or offering concrete answers when there are none. If these groups stray from accurately conveying what is conventionally known about an issue, they risk losing public trust. Moreover, if framing appears to serve overtly partisan purposes, then there is the risk that expertise will be quickly and easily reinterpreted by the public through partisan lenses. The result will be increased polarization rather than increased engagement.

Finally, journalists, experts, and advocates are not the only ones who struggle with the nature and application of framing research: Scholars remain challenged by the many strands of theorizing and approaches. This is not surprising given that the process of framing is frustratingly subjective and therefore difficult to map out and measure. Many framing studies are just poorly done: either they are conceptually and operationally weak or they fail to offer enough of a context for the issue analyzed.

In other cases, solid research is not packaged in a way that is professionally relevant or that gains notice.

Scholars also have a tendency to “reinvent the wheel” in identifying and labeling the frames that exist in any debate. Not only does this lead to a troubling level of inconsistency in understanding the nature of disputes in a policy sector such as science, the environment, or social policy, but it also leads to major differences in the measurement of media trends and in the observation of any influences. Scholars often overlook that in each policy sector, there is likely to exist a generalizable typology of latent meanings that are directly applicable to understanding a specific issue or major event. In the section on climate change, one of my chief goals is to show how an existing typology developed to explain debates over nuclear energy and biotechnology can also be used to explain the specific communication dynamics of what many experts consider to be the most pressing problem of our generation.

What is News Framing?

My description of past work has been sharpened by way of my experience translating this research for nonspecialists, including journalists, scientists, policy advocates, and communication strategists. Over the past 3 years, I have also engaged in many debates over these themes at my blog² and in dozens of talks at various universities and interdisciplinary meetings.³

The concept of framing turns on what observers have understood for centuries: in storytelling, communicators can select from a plurality of interpretations. The storyteller’s preferred meanings are filtered by the predispositions of the audience, which, in turn, shape their judgments and decisions. The origin of framing research in the study of communication is commonly attributed to the work of Erving Goffman (1974). In his ethnographic research that examined how individuals make sense of their environment and interpersonal interactions, he described frames as “schemata of interpretation” that allow individuals to locate, perceive, identify, and label issues, events, and topics. Words, according to Goffman, are like triggers that help individuals negotiate meaning through the lens of existing cultural beliefs and worldviews.

Attesting to the various intellectual roots of framing research, in the 1970s and 1980s, cognitive psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky applied framing in experimental designs to understand risk judgments and consumer choices (cf. Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). They concluded in their Nobel Prize-winning research that perception is reference dependent. If individuals are given an ambiguous or uncertain situation to consider, the different ways in which a message is presented or framed can result in very different responses, depending on the ter-

minology used to describe the problem or the visual context provided in the message. (For many members of the public, as I will discuss later, given its complexity and creeping nature, climate change is likely to be the ultimate ambiguous situation.)

The now classic definition of a frame by the sociologist William Gamson and colleagues—a frame organizes central ideas on an issue—places framing research more squarely within the realm of news discourse and audience reception. According to Gamson and Modigliani (1989), frames endow certain dimensions of a complex topic with greater apparent relevance than the same dimensions might appear to have under an alternative frame. Frames are used by audiences as “interpretative schema” to make sense of and discuss an issue; by journalists to condense complex events into interesting and appealing news reports; by policy-makers to define policy options and reach decisions; and by experts to communicate to other experts or to broader audiences (Nisbet, 2009a; Scheufele, 1999). In each of these contexts, frames simplify complex issues by lending greater importance or weight to certain considerations and arguments over others. In the process, they help communicate why an issue matters; how it can be differently defined; who or what might be responsible for problems associated with the issue; and what should be done about these problems (Entman, 1993; Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards, & Rucht, 2002).

How Does News Framing Work?

In terms of psychological accounts of the influence of news framing, Price and Tewksbury’s (1997) applicability model argues that a message frame is only effective if it is relevant—or “applicable”—to a specific existing interpretive schema acquired through socialization processes or other types of social learning. Put another way, frames appearing in the media or as part of communication campaigns are most influential when they resonate with an audience’s strongly held “perceptual lenses,” which typically mean strong feelings about another issue suddenly made relevant, or with value constructs such as religious beliefs, political partisanship, or ideology.

Media frames work by connecting the mental dots for the public. They suggest a connection between two concepts, issues, or things, such that after exposure to the framed message, audiences accept or are at least aware of the connection. An issue has been successfully framed when there is a fit between the line of reasoning a message or news story suggests on an issue and the presence of those existing mental associations within a particular audience (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). For example, as I will review in the section on climate change, by emphasizing the religious and moral dimensions of the issue, several

scientists have convinced religious leaders that understanding the science of climate change is directly applicable to questions of faith. Moreover, books and news stories that emphasize these religious dimensions have captured attention from religious audiences, readers who might not otherwise pay attention to environmental issues if framed in more traditional ways.

Alternatively, if a frame draws connections that are not relevant to something a segment of the public already values or understands, then the message is likely to be ignored or to lack personal significance. For example, as later reviewed, climate change advocates compare distortion of climate science to the George W. Bush administration's misuse of evidence in making the case to go to war against Iraq, or in formulating policy on stem cell research. Among liberals and science enthusiasts, this connection activates negative emotions, yet for many Americans the frame either cuts against their partisan leanings, and is therefore likely to be rejected, or does not hold strong personal significance, ignored as inside-the-beltway bickering.

Complementing these psychological accounts, sociologists such as William Gamson have promoted a "constructionist" explanation of news framing. According to this research, in order to make sense of political issues, citizens use as resources the frames available in media coverage, but integrate these packages with the frames forged by way of personal experience or conversations with others. Media frames might help set the terms of the debate among citizens, but rarely, if ever, do they exclusively determine public opinion. Instead, as part of a "frame contest," one interpretative package might gain influence because it resonates with popular culture or a series of events, fits with media routines or practices, or is heavily sponsored by elites (Gamson, 1992; Price, Nir, & Cappella, 2005).

As Pan and Kosicki (2005) concluded, the social constructivist approach to framing also highlights that "effects do not occur without citizens' active mental engagement and that their susceptibility to framing influences do not make them ignorant dupes" (p. 191).⁴ Many members of the public hold their own applicable lay theories based on personal experience, culture, or conventional wisdom. In combination with media coverage, these lay theories enable people to reason and talk about a complex policy issue in their own familiar terms. This allows citizens to participate in a "bottom up" framing of issues. Grassroots social movements, for example, use frames to mobilize members and connect groups into advocacy coalitions (see Croteau, Hoynes, & Ryan, 2005, for an overview). With new forms of user-centered and user-controlled digital media such as blogs, online video, and social media sites, "bottom up" alternative frames may be gaining greater influence in the

discursive contest that surrounds issues such as climate change and poverty. I return to the implications of this important new trend in user-centered digital media in the conclusion to this chapter.

The Anatomy of Frames: From Events and Sources to News

Before moving to specific case studies, a few more key details need to be covered. First, the identification and application of frames as general organizing devices—whether as shaping the meaning of advocacy campaigns or a news story—should not be confused with specific policy positions. As Gamson and his colleagues describe, individuals can disagree on an issue but share the same interpretative frame (cf. Gamson & Modigliani, 1989), which means that any frame can include pro, anti, and neutral arguments (see Ferree et al., 2002; Tankard, 2001). For example, as will be reviewed, though some conservatives have used the economic consequences frame to oppose action on climate change, many environmental advocates now seek to turn this interpretation in their favor by emphasizing instead the opportunity to revitalize the economy through investment in clean energy technology.

Consider as an alternative example the debate over embryonic stem cell research, which I have reviewed in other research (Nisbet, Brossard, & Kroepsch, 2003; Nisbet & Scheufele, 2007). A dominant frame is that the debate is really a question of “morality/ethics.” Both sides use this frame to argue their case in the debate. Research opponents say it is morally wrong to destroy embryos, since they constitute human life. Research supporters say it is morally wrong to hold back on research that could lead to important cures. Or alternatively, think about the debate over gay marriage. Both sides often argue their position via the interpretative lens of “fairness and equality.” Many progressives demand that gay couples receive equal legal status and benefits, whereas many conservative opponents question why gay couples should be granted “special rights” (Price et al., 2005).

Second, the latent meaning of any frame is often translated instantaneously by specific types of framing devices such as catchphrases, metaphors, sound bites, graphics, and allusions to history, culture, or literature (Gamson, 1992). Many studies often confuse frames and frame devices. For example, they might track in news coverage or test in an experiment a slogan such as Al Gore’s “climate crisis,” but never carefully consider the underlying interpretative meaning (“runaway, impending disaster”), of which the slogan is just one among many possible triggers. We will return to climate change later, but for now, consider just a few prominent and successful examples of such devices that have been used to alter the frame of reference in other policy debates:

Republicans have used the frame device “death tax” to recast estate tax policy in populist terms and to trigger wider public concern.

Democrats have used the phrase “gun safety” to shift the traditional debate over “gun control” away from a focus on civil liberties and instead toward an emphasis on public health.

Greenpeace has used the term “frankenfood” to redefine food biotechnology in terms of unknown risks and consequences rather than the industry-promoted focus on solving world hunger or adapting to climate change.

Religious conservatives have relabeled the medical procedure known as “dilation and extraction” as “partial birth abortion,” pushing decision making on whether to use the procedure away from doctors and into the hands of Congress and the courts.

Antismoking advocates have promoted the term “big tobacco,” which is a headline-friendly phrase that immediately emphasizes considerations of corporate accountability and wrongdoing.

Antievolutionists have coined the slogan “teach the controversy,” which instantaneously signals their preferred interpretation that there are holes in the theory of evolution and that teaching rival explanations for life’s origins is really a matter of intellectual freedom.

While pointing out central themes (and several common mistakes) from the literature, my synthesis of the scholarship on news framing, public opinion, and policy influence is by no means comprehensive. Instead, it is meant to establish common ground and a basic framework for understanding the dynamics of the two major case studies covered next, the frame contests over climate change and poverty.

Failed Strategies, Consistent Meanings

At the opening of this chapter, I described how the attendees at the AAAS panel on climate change communication all shared the uncontroversial goals of boosting public attention to the issue while motivating and empowering citizens to become involved in the policy process. Yet the attendees defined the best way to achieve these goals as “covering the science of climate change better” and “getting more coverage of climate science” out to the public. This decades-old “deficit model” paradigm assumes that when debates over science occur, ignorance is at the root of conflict or public inaction. The goal, then, of public communication

is to fill in the “deficit” in knowledge, with the hope that if the public only understood the facts of the science, then they would be more likely to see the issues as experts do. The strategy is to inform the public by way of popular science outlets such as television documentaries, science magazines, newspaper science coverage, and more recently, science Web sites and blogs (Bauer, Allum, & Miller, 2007; Nisbet & Goidel, 2007).

Any failures in this science communication process are blamed on inaccuracies in news coverage and the irrational beliefs of the public. Yet as communication researchers will recognize, this model ignores a number of realities about audiences and how they use the media to make sense of public affairs and policy debates. First, individuals are naturally “cognitive misers” who rely heavily on mental short cuts, values, and emotions to make sense of a science-related issue. These “shortcuts” work in place of paying close attention to news coverage of science debates and in lieu of scientific or policy-related knowledge (see Downs, 1957; Popkin, 1991). Second, as part of this miserly nature, individuals are drawn to news sources that confirm and reinforce their preexisting beliefs. This tendency, of course, has been facilitated by the fragmentation of the media and the rise of ideologically slanted news outlets (Mutz, 2006). Third, in a media environment with many choices, if individuals lack a strong preference or motivation for quality science coverage, then they can completely avoid such content, instead focusing narrowly on their preferred news topics or entertainment and infotainment (Prior, 2005).

As I explained at the AAAS panel, given these challenges and realities, instead of focusing on getting “more of the facts out there,” depending on the targeted demographic, information about climate change needs to be repackaged around core ideas and values that resonate with the background of the intended audience while remaining true to the underlying science. As the next section details, the communication challenge for journalists and scientists is to shift climate change from the mental box of “uncertain science,” an “unfair economic burden,” or a “Pandora’s box” of disaster toward a new cognitive and cultural reference point that connects to something the specific intended audience already values or understands. Recent examples include recasting climate change in terms of clean energy and “green collar jobs,” redefining the debate as a matter of public health, or emphasizing the issue as a matter of moral and religious duty.

First though, a few more key details about framing need to be explained. Developing a framing strategy on climate change—or in any policy sector—should be approached both deductively and inductively. Drawing on previous work, studies usually work from a set of frames that appear to reoccur across science-related policy debates. Originally identified by sociologists Gamson and Modigliani (1989) in a framing study of nuclear energy, the typology of frames, which include *public*

accountability and *progress*, was further adapted in studies of food and medical biotechnology in Europe and the United States (Dahinden, 2002; Durant, Bauer, & Gaskell, 1998; Nisbet & Lewenstein, 2002). In my recent research, I have also been applying this typology to other science-related issues such as the teaching of evolution, climate change, and an updated look at the nuclear energy debate (Nisbet, 2009a, 2009b). Second, after identifying the frames that exist around a specific policy debate and that might resonate with an intended audience, researchers can use focus groups, sophisticated experimental designs, and survey research techniques to specifically test these frames along with the types of frame devices that instantly trigger their underlying meaning.

In Table 3.1, I outline this generalizable typology of frames, defining the latent meanings of each interpretation. These frames consistently appear in science policy debates, though as we will later see in the case of climate change, unique issue-specific frames can also emerge. (With the reader in mind, throughout the next section, references to frames from the typology are italicized and frame devices are in quotes.)

Table 3.1 Frames that Consistently Appear Across Science Policy Debates

<i>Frame</i>	<i>Defines Science-Related Issue As...</i>
Social progress	...improving quality of life, or solution to problems. Alternative interpretation as harmony with nature instead of mastery, "sustainability"
Economic development/ competitiveness	...economic investment, market benefits or risks; local, national, or global competitiveness.
Morality/ethics	...in terms of right or wrong; respecting or crossing limits, thresholds, or boundaries.
Scientific/technical uncertainty	...a matter of expert understanding; what is known versus unknown; either invokes or undermines expert consensus, calls on the authority of "sound science," falsifiability, or peer-review.
Pandora's box / Frankenstein's monster / runaway science	...call for precaution in face of possible impacts or catastrophe. Out-of-control, a Frankenstein's monster, or as fatalism, i.e. action is futile, path is chosen, no turning back.
Public accountability/ governance	...research in the public good or serving private interests; a matter of ownership, control, and/or patenting of research, or responsible use or abuse of science in decision-making, "politicization,"
Middle way/ alternative path	...around finding a possible compromise position, or a third way between conflicting/polarized views or options.
Conflict/strategy	...as a game among elites; who's ahead or behind in winning debate; battle of personalities; or groups; (usually journalist-driven interpretation.)

The Framing Dynamics of Climate Change

Survey analyses depict the American public for the most part as still largely disengaged from the climate change. A majority of Republicans continue to dispute the validity of the science and the urgency of the matter, while also believing that the media have greatly exaggerated the problem (Dunlap & McCright, 2008; Pew, 2008). Even among Democrats and Independents, a majority of whom say they accept the science and are concerned about global warming, the issue still rates as a second or third tier political priority (Nisbet & Myers, 2007; Pew, 2009). Other survey research shows that regardless of party affiliation, less than a majority has adopted important personal or household behaviors related to reducing greenhouse emissions or conserving energy (Maibach, Roser-Renouf, & Taylor, 2008).

What explains the perceptual difference between the objective reality of climate change and its perceived subjective conditions? As I argued in an essay in the journal *Science*, if mainstream news attention and scientific consensus alone drove public responses, then we would expect increasing public confidence in the validity of the science and decreasing perceptual gridlock. However, instead of scientific reality, ideologically friendly frames are providing the perceptual cues for the public (Nisbet & Mooney, 2007a).

A Matter of Uncertainty and Economic Burden

Several conservative think tanks, political leaders, and commentators continue to hew closely to their decade-old playbook for downplaying the urgency of climate change, which includes questioning that human activities are driving climate change while also arguing that any action will lead to dire economic consequences. Even over the past several years, as Republican leaders such as U.S. Senator John McCain (R-AZ) and California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger have urged the need for action on global warming, the strength of these decade-old frames linger as salient in popular culture, political discourse, and the memory store of many audiences.

During the 1990s, based on focus groups and polling, Republican consultant Frank Luntz helped shape the climate skeptic playbook, recommending in a strategy memo that the issue be framed as *scientifically uncertain*, using as evidence the opinions of contrarian scientists. He also wrote that the “emotional home run” would be an emphasis on the dire *economic consequences* of action, impacts that would result in an “unfair burden” for Americans if other countries such as China and India did not participate in international agreements (Environmental Working Group, 2003).

This framing strategy was effectively incorporated into talking points, speeches, white papers, and advertisements by conservative think tanks and members of Congress to defeat major policy proposals and the adoption of the Kyoto Protocol, a treaty that would have committed the United States to cutting greenhouse gas emissions (Dunlap & McCright, 2008). The communication campaign also promoted distortions in news coverage. As political reporters applied their preferred *conflict and strategy* frame to the policy debate, focusing on which side was winning, the personalities involved, and their message strategies, they also engaged in the same type of false balance that has been common to coverage of elections and other political issues (Boycoff & Boycoff, 2004).

U.S. Senator James Inhofe (R-OK), former chair of the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, remains the loudest voice of climate skepticism. In speeches, press releases, and on his Senate web log, Inhofe casts doubt on the conclusions of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and other major scientific organizations by selectively citing scientific-sounding evidence. To amplify his message, Inhofe takes advantage of the fragmented news media, with appearances at television outlets such as Fox News, on political talk radio, and via Web traffic driven to his blog from the Drudge Report.⁵

For example, on a February 2007 *Fox & Friends* segment titled “Weather Wars,” Inhofe deceptively argued that global warming was in fact due to natural causes, adding that mainstream science was beginning to accept this conclusion. Inhofe, unchallenged by host Steve Doocy, asserted that, “those individuals on the far left, such as Hollywood liberals and the United Nations” want the public to believe that global warming is manmade. Similar frames of scientific uncertainty and economic consequences continue to be pushed by other conservative commentators, including influential syndicated columnists George Will (2008), Charles Krauthammer (2009), and Tony Blankley (2008).

An adaptation of these familiar frames is offered by Danish political scientist Bjorn Lomborg, author of *The Skeptical Environmentalist* (2001) and *Cool It* (2008). While accepting that human activities have contributed to climate change, Lomborg questions the severity of impacts, arguing that the resources spent on dealing with climate change are better spent on problems such as malaria and poverty. These novel contrarian views provide fresh fodder for skeptic commentators such as George Will (2009).

A Pandora’s Box of Looming Disaster

In contrast, former U.S. Vice President Al Gore, many environmentalists, and even some scientists have attempted to counter the uncertainty and economic consequences frames by emphasizing a *Pandora’s Box*

of looming “climate crisis.” To instantly translate their preferred interpretation, these advocates have relied on depictions of specific climate impacts, including hurricane devastation, polar bears perched precariously on shrinking ice floes, scorched, drought-stricken earth, blazing wild fires, and famous cities or landmarks under water due to future sea-level rise.

Publicity for Gore’s documentary on climate change’s effects, *An Inconvenient Truth*, dramatized climate change as an environmental Frankenstein’s monster, including a hurricane-shaped plume spewing from a smoke stack on its movie poster and a trailer telling audiences to expect “the most terrifying film you will ever see.” With an accent on visual and dramatic effects, the catastrophe strategy triggered similarly framed news coverage. For example, a 2006 *Time* magazine cover featured a polar bear on melting ice with the headline, “Global Warming: Be Worried, Be VERY Worried.”⁶

This line of communication only plays directly into the hands of climate skeptics and further reinforces the partisan divide in climate change perceptions. Andrew Revkin, who has covered climate change for nearly 20 years for the *New York Times*, argues these claims are effectively countered by critics such as Inhofe as liberal “alarmism,” since the error bars of uncertainty for each of the climate impacts are much wider than the general link between human activities and global warming. These challenges, which are easier when the target of ridicule includes a former political figure such as Gore, quickly reactivate a focus on scientific uncertainty and the heuristic of partisanship (Revkin, 2007). In addition, the public is likely to translate these appeals to fear into a sense of fatalism, especially if this information is not accompanied by specific recommendations about how they can respond to the threats (Maibach et al., 2008).

Revkin and others worry that the news media have moved from an earlier era of false balance to a new phase of overdramatization, one that skeptics, such as Inhofe, can easily exploit to dismiss climate change as a problem. Polls suggest that the public has picked up on critiques of the media by conservatives, likely filtering this information through their preferred partisan lens and their belief in liberal media bias. Such filtering results in Republicans who not only discount the climate change problem but who also agree that the mainstream news media are exaggerating its severity (Dunlap & McCright, 2008).

Public Accountability and “A War on Science”

Many journalists, advocates, and scientists have focused on *public accountability* as an additional engagement strategy on climate change. Various opinion articles, books, and news reports depicted the George W. Bush administration as putting politics ahead of science and expertise

on a number of issues, including climate change. For example, in the 2004 election, Democratic presidential candidate U.S. Senator John Kerry (D-MA) made strategic use of the public accountability frame, comparing distortions on climate change to the administration's use of intelligence to invade Iraq.⁷

In 2005, journalist Chris Mooney's best-selling *The Republican War on Science* helped crystallize the public accountability train of thought, turning the "war on science" into a partisan rallying cry. In 2007, Hillary Clinton, in a speech marking the 50th anniversary of Sputnik, promised to end the "war on science" in American politics, highlighting the prominence of this frame device.⁸ In a late 2008 transition speech, President Obama similarly invoked the public accountability frame and Gore's film while announcing his science policy advisers:

Because the truth is that promoting science isn't just about providing resources—it's about protecting free and open inquiry. It's about ensuring that facts and evidence are never twisted or obscured by politics or ideology. It's about listening to what our scientists have to say, even when it's inconvenient—especially when it's inconvenient.⁹

The public accountability frame has outraged and intensified the commitment of scientists, environmental advocates, and many Democrats, motivating them to label climate skeptics as "deniers" and to engage in ever sharper rhetorical attacks on political opponents. Yet for other members of the public, "war on science" claims are likely ignored as just more elite rancor or to further alienate Republicans on the issue.

An Economic Opportunity Rather Than a Burden

Not every citizen cares about the environment or defers to the authority of science. To generate widespread engagement with the ongoing policy debate, news coverage of climate change needs to shift away from traditional frames and devices toward new perceptual contexts that resonate with a broader and more diverse audience of Americans. Over time, these new meanings for climate change are likely to be key drivers of public engagement and, eventually, policy action.

In *Break Through: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility*, environmentalists Ted Nordhaus and Michael Schellenberger (2007) advocate a move away from the "pollution paradigm," which offers a familiar storyline of dire environmental consequences if greenhouse gas emissions are not radically reduced. Instead, they offer an alternative communication strategy, which involves turning the *economic development* frame in favor of action, recasting climate change as an opportunity to grow the economy. The two authors argue that only

by refocusing messages and building broad-based coalitions in support of “innovative energy technology” and “sustainable economic prosperity” can meaningful action on climate change be achieved.

With this framing strategy, Nordhaus and Schellenberger seek not just to engage the wider public, but also catalyze a more diverse social movement—perhaps even activating support for energy policies among both Republicans, who think predominantly in terms of market opportunities, and labor advocates, who value the possibility of job growth.

Both 2008 U.S. presidential candidates emphasized this frame, which was strongly echoed in news coverage. The Obama administration continues to promote this frame through the sound bite of “creating green jobs” and fueling economic recovery. Yet the techno-optimism of the clean energy solution is also open to the counter frame of *uncertainty*. The case of corn-based ethanol is a warning to any politician or journalist not to oversell any path forward, with public trust and continued confidence in the possibility of feasible energy solutions at stake (Russell, 2008). In this case, the gasoline substitute was initially heralded as a way to benefit the economy and to reduce greenhouse emissions, but subsequent research determined that the increased agricultural land use would actually boost emissions while also increasing food costs (Searchinger et al., 2008).

A Religious and Moral Call to Action

E. O. Wilson (2006) offered a second potentially unifying interpretation in his best-selling book, *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth*. Wilson frames environmental stewardship as not only a scientific matter, but also one of *morality and ethics*. In penning the book as an open letter to a Baptist minister, he acknowledged that as an atheist, he might hold a different belief regarding the origin of the earth, but that he shares a common value and respect for nature, what the Bible symbolically calls “creation.” In this manner, he has engaged Christian readers and media outlets that might not otherwise pay attention to popular science books or appeals related to climate change. Paralleling Wilson’s interpretation, an increasing number of Christian leaders, including Pope Benedict XVI and evangelicals such as Richard Cizik and Rick Warren, are emphasizing the religious duty to be “stewards” of God’s creation.

The *morality and ethics* frame is also featured in Gore’s WE campaign, which launched in spring 2008. The WE campaign to “repower America” attempts to unify U.S. citizens by framing climate change as a solvable and shared moral challenge. For example, in television and print advertisements, the WE campaign aims to break the gridlock of partisan perceptions by pairing unlikely spokespeople, such as Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) with Republican and former Speaker

of the House Newt Gingrich, and self-professed respectively liberal and conservative clergymen Al Sharpton and Pat Robertson.

Other WE ads compare action on global warming to the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, to World War II, and to the recovery from the Great Depression. More recent WE TV spots, which feature actors as ranchers, construction workers, and auto workers, stress the economic development frame, emphasizing job creation and growth. Importantly, these ads are placed during daytime talk shows and entertainment programming and in leisure magazines, which all reach non-news audiences who might not otherwise pay attention to coverage of climate change.

Similar to the Pandora's Box metaphor widely used in 2006, as a way to dramatize the complexity of climate change in a novel way, journalists have also started to echo this *morality and ethics* frame in their coverage of climate change. For example, *Time* magazine devoted its 2008 Earth Day cover to that interpretation. Calling to mind the iconic Iwo Jima flag-raising photograph, the cover featured an illustration of soldiers struggling to plant a tree and the headline, "How to Win the War on Global Warming."¹⁰ Acknowledging an overt public agenda-setting goal, managing editor Richard Stengel (2008) described the cover as "Our call to arms to make this challenge—perhaps the most important one facing the planet—a true national priority."¹¹

When Issue Specific Frames Emerge

Since the beginning of this decade, the *public health* implications of climate change have emerged as a potentially powerful interpretative resource for experts, journalists, and advocates (Frumkin, Hess, Luber, Malilay, & McGeehin, 2008). This trend is an example of how a unique issue-specific frame may emerge that is not predicted by the general typology for science debates outlined in Table 3.1. The *public health* frame stresses the potential for climate change to increase the incidence of infectious diseases, asthma, allergies, heat stroke, and other salient health problems, especially among the most vulnerable populations, such as the elderly and children. In the process, the public health frame makes climate change personally relevant to new audiences by connecting the issue to health problems that are already familiar and perceived as important. The frame also shifts the geographic location for impacts, replacing visuals of remote arctic regions, animals, and peoples with more socially proximate neighbors and places across local communities and cities. Coverage at local television news outlets and specialized urban media is also generated.

As this section details, framing analysis can not only be used to describe and track the communication dynamics of the climate change debate, it can also be used to identify new meanings and stories that can

be told by experts, advocates, and journalists. In the conclusion, I return to specific recommendations on how this type of framing analysis can be further developed and used in collaborative initiatives among these groups. First, however, I review the case of poverty, which offers additional insight on how framing can be applied to break through to the public on gridlocked policy debates.

Beyond a Language of Poverty

Few Americans seem to be aware that over 40 million jobs in the United States—or about one in three—pay low wages. The great majority of low wage jobs lack benefits such as health insurance or retirement accounts and provide little or no chance for career advancement. These conditions translate into 35 million Americans who earn poverty-level incomes, while millions more struggle to make ends meet (Boushey, Fremstad, Gragg, & Waller, 2007). Yet, in the face of this urgent problem, many antipoverty advocates and media commentators express great optimism about achieving effective policy solutions. They argue that a confluence of economic trends and focal events—ranging from the devastation of Hurricane Katrina to the 2008 presidential campaign to the economic recession—have created the opportunity to mobilize public support for policies that improve the lives of low wage workers, reduce poverty, and strengthen the country.

Seizing upon this policy moment, these advocates have pitched a variety of specific proposals. The menu includes raising the minimum wage; increasing access to health, disability, and life insurance; requiring retirement benefits and paid time off; offering job training and education; subsidizing child care; expanding housing vouchers and the Earned Income Tax Credit; increasing unemployment benefits; expanding Pell Grants for college; promoting unionization; and modernizing the food stamp and TANF programs.

The labels, themes, and language used to promote these ideas are equally diverse. For example, the Center for American Progress echoes a traditional progressive emphasis on a “fair economy” with its “Task Force on Poverty” and its lead report, entitled “From Poverty to Prosperity: A National Strategy to Cut Poverty in Half.” *American Prospect* magazine has echoed this call to action, with its special May 2007, issue on “Ending Poverty in America.” Yet, other organizations, such as the Ford Foundation and the think tank Inclusion have argued for a different message and set of labels, emphasizing instead low wage work, responsible economic planning, or “social inclusion.”

While many innovative policy ideas have emerged, in order to build public consensus and energize widespread concern, advocates, experts, and journalists need to go beyond traditional stories about poverty and

make meaningful otherwise apparently isolated problems and solutions. Currently there is no agreed upon blueprint or story format for communicating the “big picture” on how the minimum wage, for example, is connected to Pell grants for college, housing vouchers, or increased unionization. Moreover, for many Americans, news coverage still inadvertently places the roots of poverty in the same problematic mental boxes related to race, individualism, and moral failings.

Conflicting Values and Deep Ambivalence

During the 1990s, there was an explosion of research in political science, communication, and sociology on the factors that shape public opinion and media coverage of poverty-related issues. While this past research mainly focused on attitudes or news coverage specifically about welfare reform, multiple strands of evidence demonstrate that the same general principles still apply today, despite changes in the political and media environment. These factors include the stubborn perceptual screen of individualism and belief in limited government, lingering racial stereotypes, and patterns in how the news media, particularly TV news, cover issues related to poverty and low income work.

When reaching judgments about poverty, Americans actively draw upon a few core cultural values. In particular, many survey analyses have identified a belief in individualism as guiding preferences about social spending and policies. The assumption underlying a belief in individualism is that economic opportunity in the United States is widespread and that anyone who tries hard enough can succeed (Gilens, 1996a). Yet other values also play a role. In particular, individualism is balanced in the minds of many Americans by humanitarianism, or the belief that government has an obligation to assist those who are most in need (Kuklinski, 2001).

In one classic study demonstrating this ambivalence, political scientists John Zaller and Stanley Feldman (1992) analyzed the open-ended answers of survey respondents about whether or not the government should spend more on social services, including education and health. Respondents who opposed increased spending offered thoughts that drew almost exclusively on individualism and a corresponding belief in limited government, emphasizing personal effort, responsibility, and hard work while opposing increased taxes and bureaucracy. In contrast, supporters of increased government emphasized the core value of humanitarianism—mentioning a duty to help others and the need for the government to provide social assistance—but they *also* somewhat ambivalently warned against increased taxes and bureaucracy, emphasizing that before receiving assistance, individuals should always try to get along on their own.

More recent work demonstrates the ability of news frames to activate the core values of either individualism or humanitarianism as the criteria by which audiences evaluate anti-poverty initiatives. In an experiment with college students, Shen and Edwards (2005) asked student subjects to fill out an initial questionnaire that measured their orientations towards both individualism and humanitarianism. Subjects were then asked to read one of two different versions of a newspaper article about poverty. After finishing the article, they were instructed to write down any thoughts that came to mind. As depicted below, the first article by way of the headline and lead paragraph framed the issue in terms of individualism and the second article framed the issue in terms of humanitarianism.

Headline: Welfare Reform Must Require Strict Work Requirements.

Americans remain sharply divided on whether welfare reform should expand work requirements or increase aid to low income families. Welfare critics argue that recent welfare reform legislation doesn't go far enough to require recipients to work for their benefits. They would like to see tougher work requirements on welfare benefits.

Headline: Tough Welfare Restrictions Said to Hurt the Poor and Children.

Americans remain sharply divided on whether welfare should expand work requirements or increase aid to low income families. Welfare supporters and defenders warn that further restrictions on welfare benefits would hurt children and the poor. They argue that welfare reform should aim to reduce poverty and assist needy families.

Not surprisingly, for subjects who read the first article, they recorded significantly more thoughts that were in line with individualistic objections to welfare (Shen & Edwards, 2005). In comparison, the subjects who read the second article were more likely to write down thoughts that were in line with a humanitarian support for welfare. Yet more importantly, among readers of the first article who also scored high on individualistic values, they generated significantly more opposing statements about welfare than readers who did not score high on this value orientation. In other words, the news article's selective emphasis on individual accountability triggered the application and intensification of this core value in evaluating welfare reform. A similar amplification, however, was not found for subjects reading the second article who also scored high on humanitarianism.

Consistent with the study by Feldman and Zaller (1992), these experimental findings provide further evidence that Americans' views about poverty are developed on an uneven playing field. In comparison to humanitarianism, the core value of individualism exists as a far more potent schema, always ready to be triggered by way of selectively framed arguments and news coverage.

Black Stereotypes in White America

While core values and their activation by news frames play a significant role in structuring American views about poverty, the issue is by no means "race neutral." In fact, based on analyses of multiple national surveys, the political scientist Martin Gilens (1995, 1996b, 1999) concludes that among Whites, the belief that "black people are lazy" is the most important source of opposition to spending on welfare and to programs that provide direct assistance such as food stamps and unemployment benefits.

In one survey analysis, Gilens determined that holding negative perceptions of White welfare mothers led to some increase in opposition to welfare spending, but the increase was limited. In contrast, holding negative views of Black welfare mothers resulted in substantial increases in opposition (Gilens, 1996b, 1999). He also compared the relationship between the real world incidence of Blacks in poverty to shifts in news magazine and TV portrayals, examining any corresponding changes in the public's perception of poverty's racial composition. Between 1985 and 1991, while the actual percent of poor who were Black remained relatively constant at about 29%, the percent of Blacks featured in media portrayals of poverty increased from 50% to 63%; and public estimates of the percent of the poor who were Black increased from 39% to 50%.

Other research is consistent with Gilens's conclusions. For example, Gilliam (1999) traces the stereotype of the "black welfare queen" to a story recited in stump speeches during the 1976 presidential campaign by Ronald Reagan. Gilliam argues that the image has become a common script found in TV news coverage. In his experiments testing the effects of these stereotypes, Gilliam finds that when White viewers watch TV news portrayals of Black mothers on welfare, exposure leads viewers to oppose welfare spending and to endorse beliefs that Blacks are lazy, sexually promiscuous, law breakers, and undisciplined. Similarly, in a separate study analyzing Chicago-area TV news coverage, Entman and Rojecki (2000) found that the dominant visuals in TV stories related to poverty featured Blacks. Moreover, beyond images of race, they found that poverty itself was seldom the direct subject of a news story, with reports rarely focused on low income, hunger, homelessness, low housing quality, unemployment, or welfare dependence. Instead, the focus

was on symptoms associated with poverty, particularly racial discrimination and problems of health or health care.

TV News and Attributions of Responsibility

In combination with core values and stereotypes, the public tends to reach decisions on political issues by reducing them down to questions of responsibility and blame. In answering these questions, the public relies heavily on the news, especially television. Across a series of studies, Iyengar (1991) finds that the mode of presentation across TV reports of poverty can alter viewers' interpretations of causal responsibility (i.e., judgments about poverty's origins), and treatment responsibility (i.e., judgments relative to who or what has the power to alleviate poverty).

Based on his analysis of TV reports from the late 1980s, Iyengar (1991) concluded that most reports tended to be packaged in "episodic" terms, focused on a particular event or individual, defining poverty relative to concrete instances. (An example would be a story filed during an especially cold winter in Chicago depicting a single mother struggling to afford the cost of heating.) Far less common were "thematic" TV stories that took the form of more general backgrounders, placing poverty in the context of social conditions or institutions.

In experiments, Iyengar (1991) discovered that, in contrast to thematic reporting, episodic stories led White middle class viewers to assign the causes and treatments of poverty to individuals rather than societal conditions and government institutions. Race also played a role. News coverage of Black poverty in general, and episodic coverage of Black mothers specifically, heightened the degree to which White middle class viewers held individuals responsible for their economic plight.

Gilliam (n.d. [a]) notes that while the natural tendency for journalists and advocates alike is to tell personal stories about issues with the goal of capturing interest and stirring emotion, episodic presentations are likely to lead viewers to "miss the forest for the trees." Overwhelmed by personal stories, viewers miss out on any greater understanding of the systemic causes of poverty. In other words, memorability and vividness in news portrayals of poverty likely come at the expense of support for public policy. If journalists and advocates want to focus on institutional fixes to the problem, thematic TV news stories are likely to favor the effort to build public support for these goals.

The Decade After Welfare Reform

In a series of published analyses, political scientists Sanford Schram and Joe Soss identified each of the previously described factors as contributing to the passage in 1996 of welfare reform legislation. Yet, they explained,

while many centrist Democrats predicted that the victory would pave the way for more meaningful antipoverty policies, the intensive communication campaign needed to build support for the historic legislation might have inadvertently delivered many self-inflicted wounds. In the public's mind, there remains the interpretation that poverty is fundamentally a problem anchored in personal responsibility and race. Despite many recent focusing events and powerful economic forces, public perceptions today are little changed from the 1980s.

For decades, in attacking the welfare system, conservatives claimed that symptoms associated with poverty such as crime, teen pregnancy, and drugs were in fact the result of a permissive system that allowed lifelong dependency on government assistance. Poverty, in fact, was an outcome of big government. By the early 1990s, centrist Democrats had concluded that conservatives had successfully used welfare to turn the public against any public spending and to stoke the flames of racism. Yet they reasoned that if Democrats could reform welfare and make government aid recipients appear to "play by the rules," then they could claim political credit, undercut racism, and mobilize the public in support of more effective antipoverty policies. Soon after his election, Clinton set the agenda for these efforts, vowing in his 1993 State of the Union address to "end welfare as we know it" (Soss & Schram, 2007).

Playing on the public's conflicting orientations toward individualism and compassion for the "deserving poor," both conservatives and centrist Democrats recast policy initiatives in terms of "welfare to work," and labeled bills using frame devices such as "personal responsibility," "temporary assistance," and "family self-sufficiency." Uglier, more tacit messages evoked the myth of the "Black welfare queen" or similar race codes, while the news media's episodic presentation style and skewed depictions of race further reinforced individual attributions (Schram & Soss, 2001).

This message campaign successfully redefined welfare for the public as a social crisis. In 1992, only 7% of the public named welfare as the most important problem facing the country, but by 1996, this number had crested to 27% (Soss & Schram, 2007). In fact, by 1996, given magnified media attention and selective interpretations that played on public values and racial attitudes, more than 60% of Americans supported handing responsibility for welfare over to the states, and a similar number supported capping welfare benefits at 5 years. In August 1996, following successful Congressional passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, more than 80% of the public said that they supported Clinton signing the bill into law (Shaw & Shapiro, 2002).

In the decade since 1996, the emphasis on ending "long term dependency" continues to serve as the primary criterion by which many elites

and the news media define the success of welfare reform. Specifically, journalists have focused almost exclusively on statistics showing a decrease in welfare caseloads and an increase in the number of individuals who have left welfare to take low wage jobs (Schramm & Soss, 2001).

Tipping Point or Illusion?

By making welfare more “morally demanding,” centrist Democrats hoped to reinstall confidence in the ability of the government to help the poor. Strategists, pundits, and several prominent scholars had predicted that welfare reform would set in motion a powerful policy feedback effect, removing the taint of racism, and opening up the public to support for more effective policies.

Unfortunately, in a systematic analysis comparing multiple indicators of polling data gathered between 1998 and 2004 with data from the late 1980s, Soss and Schramm (2007) find no evidence for this impact. The tendency for Americans to blame poverty on a lack of effort has held steady, feelings toward the poor have grown slightly cooler, willingness to aid the poor has stayed the same or diminished, and racial attitudes still color support for assistance to the poor.

Yet, pointing to more recent polling data, influential progressives remain optimistic that the public is finally ready to get behind a campaign against poverty (Halpin, 2007; Teixeira, 2007). In particular, a widely talked about analysis by Pew (2007) indicates a roughly 10% shift between 1994 and 2007 in the public’s agreement that the government should take care of people who can’t take care of themselves, guarantee food and shelter for all, and help more needy people even if it means government debt.

However, as Soss and Schramm (2007) point out, any comparison to 1994 is misleading, since these polls were taken at the height of the welfare reform campaign. During this period, news attention to welfare soared, with this coverage overwhelmingly negative in tone. By 1998, however, news attention and negativity had both sharply declined (Schneider & Jacoby 2005). In reality, absent very salient messages attacking welfare programs, *what the 2007 polls reveal is a normalization of public attitudes about poverty to their pre-Clinton era levels, rather than any turning point in public sentiment.*

A more recent analysis by Dyck and Hussey (2008) supports these conclusions. Although news attention to welfare policy declined between 1999 and 2004, in this coverage, Blacks remained dramatically overrepresented as the face of America’s poor. Blacks during these years constituted roughly 25% of Americans in poverty, yet more than 40% of news magazine pictures of poor people at *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *US News & World Report* featured blacks. With this racial stereotype remaining

salient and few counterstereotypes available in news coverage, Dyck and Hussey find in their analysis of 2004 survey data that the belief among Whites that “Blacks are lazy” remained among the strongest predictors of opposition to welfare spending.

Today, these enduring misconceptions about individual responsibility and work ethic as causal agents of poverty continue to be reinforced by leading political figures, even by moderates such as New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg.¹² Though he might be celebrated in the press for promoting innovative antipoverty policies, Bloomberg’s language and definition of the problem is decidedly old-fashioned. In speeches, he argues for restoring the “dignity of work” and “ending dependency” by “restoring personal responsibility” through a program that “incentivizes personal decisions” (Bloomberg, 2007). Each of these phrases serve as powerful triggers, setting in motion a train of thought that narrowly places responsibility for poverty on the individual rather on society and its institutions.

Reframing the Problem and the Solutions

The realities of income disparity, low wage work, and economic insecurity span partisan, ideological, and racial boundaries. Yet in news media portrayals and political messaging, most policy solutions continue to be framed in ways that trigger the perceptual lens of individualism, limited government, and racial bias.

To date, the most comprehensive research on the re-framing of low wage work and poverty was funded by the Ford Foundation and carried out by Meg Bostrom and her company Public Knowledge LLC. In a series of analyses conducted in 2001, 2002, and 2004, Bostrom identified several alternative frames that might be able to break through the public’s persistent belief that poverty is a matter of individual failure, establishing a train of thought that focuses instead on systemic problems and solutions. Bostrom (2004) developed and tested several rival interpretations to the traditional *sympathy for the poor* frame that focused on moral appeals, individual stories, and solutions. She examined the influence of these frames as experiments embedded in a nationally representative telephone survey ($n = 3205$). Across subsamples of survey respondents, she tested the traditional *sympathy for the poor* frame, a new *responsible economic planning* frame, and a slightly different *responsible community planning* frame.

Within subsamples, these alternative frames were first presented as part of an introductory script. After that, they were reemphasized in selectively worded questions that asked generally about issue priority, issue concern, news attentiveness to the issue, the perceived cause of a decline in wages, followed by an agree/disagree attitudinal question

regarding what should be done in terms of policy. This innovative design ensures that across the survey a specific train of thought is established for the respondent before answering a series of neutrally worded key indicator questions. At the end of the survey, these key indicator questions served as dependent variables to test the relative effects of the three frame conditions. Respondents were asked about the perceived opportunity to get ahead; preferences for government action on the economy; the priority of specific economic policies; beliefs relative to how the economy works; and perceptions regarding who is to blame for poverty. Table 3.2

Table 3.2 Description of Frames Tested on Poverty

<i>Frame</i>	<i>Script Read to Survey Respondents</i>
Sympathy for the Poor	In a weak economy the working poor have to take any job they can get...Imagine the plight of a single mother working a low wage job. Even at \$10/hour she earns only about \$20,000 a year with few benefits like healthcare and paid leave. Who could support a family on \$20,000 a year? The working poor frequently need to choose between buying food and paying the rent. We need to ask our government officials to find a way to address these problems and help those in need.
Responsible Economic Planning	The nation is relying too heavily on low-wage service sector jobs from national companies without insisting that they pay workers good wages and benefits...Creating prosperity tomorrow requires responsible planning today. Too many companies and decision makers focus on short-term profits and short term thinking to the detriment of our workforce. And when we allow one part of the workforce to weaken and struggle, it weighs down the economy for us all, resulting in a lower standard of living. Our nation needs to change its short-term thinking and start building good-paying jobs with benefits, and a strong economy for the long term. With better planning we can repair the nation's economic engine and create a future with a strong economy and good-paying jobs for our workers.
Responsible Community Planning	Communities are relying too heavily on the low-wage service sector jobs that national companies bring to an area without insisting that the national companies invest back into the community by paying workers good wages and benefits... Creating prosperous communities tomorrow requires responsible planning today. Too many companies and decision makers focus on short-term profits and short term thinking to the detriment of our communities. And when we allow one part of the community to weaken and struggle, it weighs down the economy for us all, resulting in a lower standard of living. Our nation needs to change its short-term thinking and start building good-paying jobs with benefits, and strong communities for the long term. With better planning we can repair the nation's economic engine and create a future with a strong economy and good-paying jobs and strong communities.

summarizes the language used in each frame's corresponding introductory script to set the train of thought for respondents on the issue of low income work and poverty.

Among the frames tested from Table 3.2, the most effective interpretation for activating support across diverse audiences was the *responsible economic planning* frame. In the survey analysis, when presented in this context, policies were supported by net margins 4 to 11% higher than when framed in traditional terms of *sympathy for the poor*. Moreover, the *responsible economic planning* frame also rated as more credible than other well worn arguments such as "breaking a cycle of childhood poverty" and the emphasis on a "fair economy" where "people who work hard shouldn't be poor."

Perhaps most importantly, in the survey analyses, the economic planning frame was able to generate added support for low wage work issues among nontraditional segments of the public, audiences for whom the typical *sympathy for the poor* frame might actually activate increased opposition. These groups included the self-identified "working class," noncollege educated and older men, union voters, and older voters without a college education. The frame even appeared to soften opposition to proposals among traditional Republican voters.¹³ Table 3.3 reproduces the key differences and points of emphasis that Bostrom identifies between the *responsible economic planning* frame and the *sympathy for the poor* frame. In the conclusion to this chapter, we will return to a discussion of what these findings mean not only for the media strategy of advocates, but also for journalists who want to break through entrenched audience filters on the issue.

Lessons from UK's Social Inclusion Movement

The ability of the *responsible economic planning* frame to unify public support reflects closely the successful efforts in Great Britain by Tony Blair and the New Labour party to redefine antipoverty initiatives in terms of "social inclusion." Instead of alleviating the *condition* of poverty and its implied moral and racial underpinnings, the new social inclusion direction in government was about improving "prospects and networks and life chances" rather than simply raising the dollar amount of wages or redistributing wealth through cash welfare benefits or taxes (Fairclough, 2000).

The language and metaphors of social inclusion are designed to focus attention on the structures and processes that exclude certain groups of individuals from full participation in society, and may offer important clues for advocates in the United States. Similar to the *responsible economic planning* frame, the logic emphasizes that in a competitive global marketplace, the nation is stronger, more secure, and better off if more

Table 3.3 Key Elements of Poverty-Related Frames

<i>Responsible Economic Planning</i>	<i>Sympathy for the Poor</i>
The issues are the economy, jobs, and the future of prosperity	The issues are poverty, the poor, and the working poor.
The relevant values are responsibility, vision, stewardship, interdependence.	The relevant values are sympathy, disparities, the Golden Rule, and generosity.
The economy is a system that can be influenced; humans have power to influence economic conditions.	The economy is irrelevant, or it is cyclical, uncontrollable.
Trends, broader influences are integral to the story.	Profiles of sad individuals are integral to the story.
The reader's relationship to the problem is connective; it is about "us"	The reader's relationship to the problem is separate; it is about "them."
Solutions are the focus; the problem is manageable	Problems are the focus; the issue is overwhelming.
Responsibility for fixing the problem lies with citizens collectively. Strengthening communities is one of the objectives for action.	Responsibility for fixing the problem rests with the individuals who are having the problem.

of its population can participate fully in the labor force and economy. The metaphor of the "caravan of the desert" has been offered as a frame device to quickly and vividly translate the meaning of social inclusion:

One can picture our nation as a convoy crossing the desert. Everyone may be moving forward, but if the distance between those at the back and [the] rest of the convoy keeps growing there comes a point at which it breaks up.¹⁴

A Work in Progress: The Reframing of Poverty

A few recent policy reports and legislative proposals incorporate elements of the *responsible economic planning* frame. For example, in 2007, Margy Waller's Mobility Agenda applied the frame to their own reformulation of the definition and measure for low wage work (Boushey et al., 2007). This approach defines low wage work as a job that pays less than two-thirds of the median wage, or typical job, held by men. In analyses and graphical displays of data, this recalibration of jobs away from the traditional measure of either below or above the poverty line more accurately and effectively communicates how structural problems in the economy and society are pulling workers apart. This "much less than the rest" approach shows that for low wage workers their inflation

adjusted wages today are roughly equivalent to what they were in 1979. As the authors of the report argue, while remaining accurate, this new metric also fits better with a message that might mobilize broader segments of the public to care about low wage issues. Echoing the *economic planning frame* as well as social inclusion's "caravan in the desert" metaphor, the authors' emphasize that:

An economy that leaves a substantial segment of workers far behind the rest of the workforce is contrary to the national belief that the United States is "one nation, indivisible...." As a nation, we are stronger and more cohesive if we have an economy that does not allow those at the back to fall so far behind that the essential unit of the nation breaks apart. (Boushey et al., 2007 p. 5)

Though for the most part, still focusing on moral calls to action that employ a *sympathy for the poor* appeal, the Center for American Progress (CAP) has also begun to shift to a *responsible economic planning* frame, connecting poverty to national economic recovery. For example, in a white paper entitled "The Price of Poverty," CAP argues that if generations of children remain in poverty as adults, then the trend grows the overall cost of social services and leads to additional costs to the economy in terms of lost tax revenues from adults who would otherwise be working. The report concludes: "Many believe that the moral case for ending child poverty is already clear. But this research makes clear that failing to tackle poverty today imposes substantial financial costs on society as well."¹⁵ Other CAP reports have defined programs such as food stamps and home energy assistance and retrofitting as benefiting efforts at economic stimulus, emphasizing that these "investments" create private sector jobs in the food and housing industry while freeing up money for consumer spending among low income households.¹⁶

In terms of shifts in news coverage, analyses of print coverage show that there has been some decline in racial stereotypes about poverty (Dyck & Hussey 2008) and an increase in thematic depictions of structural problems and solutions (Gould Douglas, 2001, 2007). Yet there is little research indicating whether or not national TV news has shifted from its preferred package of episodic coverage. There is also scant data on racial bias in national TV news, and almost no data on how local television news frames low wage issues. Specific to amount of attention, these recent analyses show that even as of 2006, media attention to the "working poor" or "low wage jobs" was still relatively limited in comparison to other major policy issues. The 2008 presidential campaign and more recent debate over economic recovery have focused, somewhat vaguely, on "relief for the middle class" with little explicit mention of low wage workers. In addition, few stories about poverty-related issues

appear on national television news. Finally, even when poverty or low wage work is mentioned, news attention is frequently incidental to a broader focus on issues such as either health insurance or housing generally (Gould Douglas, 2007).

A 2007 seven-part series by the *Columbus (OH) Dispatch* offers a leading example of how news coverage can successfully reframe poverty and low wage work around *responsible economic growth*. In a state ravaged by urban job losses and unemployment, instead of focusing anecdotally on individual stories of struggle, the *Dispatch* editorial team framed the problem in terms of communities, specifically Ohio's seven largest cities. In doing so, the newspaper evaded the all too familiar trap of characterizing job loss and poverty as an "us" (the suburbs) versus "them" (the inner cities) problem. Consider the train of thought generated by *Dispatch* editor Benjamin Marrison in his editorial launching the series. Reflecting on his experience as a young reporter covering Toledo City Hall, Marrison recounted how he asked the then city manager why "anyone in the suburbs should care about Toledo?" As Marrison described:

"A region is like a piece of fruit," said [the city manager]. "The core is the city. If the core rots, it's only a matter of time until all the fruit is rotten." That exchange forever changed my view of cities. It made sense. Although many of us live in the suburbs, we depend on cities for things that are important to us. We also take them for granted.... We should all pray for their success. While many of us live and work in the suburbs, the quality of life for all Ohioans will deteriorate if our major cities continue to decline.

Finally, the biggest impact on how poverty and low wage work will be framed by both advocates and the news media will be the message set by President Obama and his administration. However, if Obama's major campaign speeches and policy papers on the topic are any indication, then it appears as if Obama is not unlike the rest of the progressive policy community: He still lacks a consistent storyline.

For example, in the opening of his speeches, Obama has heavily emphasized a *sympathy for the poor* moral imperative, telling the story of Bobby Kennedy's encounter with a hungry child in 1968 and Kennedy's tearful reaction to reporters: "How can a country like this allow it?" He then uses the story and question as a recurring theme throughout the speech (Obama, 2007). On urban poverty, Obama has also emphasized traditional themes of personal responsibility, arguing the "difference it makes when people start caring for themselves," admonishing fathers that "responsibility does not end at conception," and asserting that "it makes a difference when a parent turns off the TV once in

awhile, puts away the video games, and starts reading to their child, and getting involved in his education” (Obama, 2007).

In addition, simply by way of its politically safe title, the administration’s “Task Force on the Middle Class,” led by Vice President Joe Biden, risks deflecting further attention away from the needs of low income workers. For example, while several progressive advocates stress that the administration’s affiliated “green jobs” programs be heavily focused on low-income urban youth, the Vice President officially launched his Task Force initiative with news coverage and an op-ed in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* headlined “Green jobs Are a Way to Aid the Middle Class,” a frame device that immediately calls to mind a very different focus and target for the jobs program (Biden, 2009).

Still, in a positive sign for low wage advocates, Obama has also emphasized in his public remarks the systemic causes of poverty. In a message that echoes the *responsible economic planning* frame, he consistently attributes part of the blame for poverty to more thematic realities of the economy:

Today’s economy has made it easier to fall into poverty. The fall is often more precipitous and more permanent than ever before.... You used to be able to count on your job to be there for your entire life. Today almost any job can be shipped overseas in an instant.... Everyone American is vulnerable to the insecurities and anxieties of this new economy (Obama, 2007).

Another promising framing strategy is the explicit connection that the Obama administration has made between addressing climate change and his “Making Work Pay” program, a plan to provide up to \$500 in subsidy to low income individuals and \$1,000 to families. To pay for the program and to reduce the burden on the federal deficit, the Obama administration proposed in its 2009 Federal budget to allocate \$60 billion from revenue generated by a still yet to be passed carbon cap-and-trade bill (Eilperin & Mufson, 2009).

The strategy is risky, but in real policy terms, it starts to connect the dots for the public around a new model for an environmentally sustainable and socially responsible economy. As Nordhaus and Schellenberger (2007) have argued, this type of move bridges policy coalitions, tying the goals of poverty advocates with those of environmental groups. The strategy also activates incidental media attention to climate change and poverty across news beats and audiences. Environmental reporters have begun to include in their climate coverage mention of low wage work policies and similarly, political reporters have begun to mention climate policy in the context of their focus on economic recovery programs.

Conclusion

This chapter is written as a primer for journalists, experts, and advocates who want to understand the relevance of framing research for engaging the public on complex policy problems. Yet it is also a call to action for scholars in our field to provide communication solutions to the perceptual gridlock surrounding these issues.

A Deductive Foundation for Research

On climate change, despite two decades of ever-stronger scientific consensus and record amounts of news coverage, Americans are still locked in a deep divide over the issue, particularly along partisan and ideological lines. While there have been several innovations in communication strategy, many scientists, advocates, and journalists still focus on frames that are easily dismissed as alarmism, are not personally relevant to a diversity of Americans, or that might actually further alienate Republicans, the very group they need to mobilize behind policy action.

Recent large scale survey and market segmentation techniques have begun to examine what specific groups in society want to know about the issue, their political interpretations, the perceived implications for their daily lives, the resonance or conflict with their values and social identity, where they are most likely to receive information, and who or what they are looking to for answers (Leiserowitz, Roser-Renouf, & Maibach, 2008; Maibach et al., 2008). If framing research is going to be combined with these audience segmentation techniques, researchers will require a solid and valid starting point.

In this chapter, I note that the framing literature has a general tendency to “reinvent the wheel” in identifying and labeling the frames that exist in any debate. Not only does this lead to inconsistency in understanding the nature of disputes such as climate change, but it also leads to major differences in the measurement of media trends and in the observation of any influences.

As I argue, what is often overlooked is that in any policy arena—whether science, foreign policy, or social policy—there likely exists a generalizable typology of latent meanings that are directly applicable to understanding a specific issue or major event. In my analysis of climate change, one of my chief goals was to show how an existing typology developed to explain debates over nuclear energy, biotechnology, and more recently evolution, can also be used to explain the specific communication dynamics of climate change. Across policy sectors, research could strongly benefit from a similar synthesis of research that identifies and conceptualizes common and recurring frames.

Additional research using in-depth interviews, focus groups, and

sophisticated survey and experimental techniques needs to further explore, identify, and test these frames across various and well-defined audiences. A careful understanding of the frame contest that exists in the real world is especially important for experimental researchers. This would not only bolster consistency in stimulus design and the possible triangulation of results, but also increase external validity and boost the relevance to professional practice, matching frames as they are tested in the lab with the reality of how they appear in public discourse and are used by journalists in the news media.

On poverty, more than a decade after welfare reform, the tendency for Americans to blame poverty on a lack of effort has held steady. Moreover, feelings toward the poor have grown slightly cooler, willingness to aid the poor has stayed the same or diminished, and racial attitudes still color support for assistance to the poor. Even though recent events and trends offer opportunities for policy action, advocates, political leaders, and journalists still lack a consistent frame on the issue. In fact, many continue to emphasize frames or racial stereotypes that actually undermine support for policy action.

Ford Foundation-funded work by Meg Bostrom has identified the *responsible economic planning* frame as an alternative and more effective focus for advocates and journalists seeking to build public consensus. This research also points to innovative methods for combining focus group research with split-ballot survey tests of alternative frames on a policy issue. More recent work has applied similar principles and methods to understanding how to reframe related debates over race (Gilliam, n.d. [b]) and the role of the government in managing the economy.¹⁷

One challenge that merits additional research is how to break the tyranny of the news peg in coverage of poverty and low-wage work. In other words, based on the principles reviewed in this chapter, what types of staged news events and story pitches successfully generate both print and television news attention, result in an emphasis on preferred frames, and reach key targeted audiences? For example, in her report, Bostrom (2004) concludes with a few ideas about several possible news angles that might activate in coverage a *responsible economic planning* frame. More work in this area needs to be done. These research efforts can be completed by bringing organizations, journalists, and media producers together to participate in a “communication summit” on low-wage work. Similar strategies should be applied to climate change.

Social Media and “Bottom Up” Framing

In thinking about news framing, it is important to also expand the scope of research and applications beyond the mainstream media to include new interactive forms of digital media as well as new genres of docu-

mentary film, especially when these films are a complement to coalition-driven communication campaigns. In terms of new forms of digital and interactive media, recent proposals have focused on building a “participatory” public media infrastructure at the local and regional level (Aufderheide & Clark, 2008; Miel & Farris, 2008). With cutbacks in coverage at local and regional newspapers, many communities lack the type of relevant news and information that is needed to adapt to challenges such as climate change or to reach collective choices about economic development, low wage work, and poverty.

As a way to address these local-level information gaps, government agencies and private foundations are being called upon to fund public television and radio organizations as digital media hubs. These initiatives would partner public media with for-profit media outlets to share digital content that is interactive and user-focused. The digital portals would feature in depth reporting, blogs, podcasts, shared video, news aggregation, user recommendations, news games, social networking, and commenting. Proponents argue that these new models for nonprofit citizen-focused media are an integral part of the infrastructure that local communities need to adapt to climate change, to move forward with economic development, and to solve problems such as poverty. As proponents observe, a community without a quality source of public affairs information—packaged in a way that is accessible and relevant to most members of that community—is ill prepared to make collective decisions about these issues.

These new forms of interactive digital media also shift the focus away from a transmission model of traditional news framing effects to a more interactive, social constructivist, and “bottom up” model of framing. As lay citizens become active contributors, creators, commentators, sorters, and archivers of digital news content, new possibilities *and* new demands arise for framing research and its professional applications.

Related to interactive digital media hubs, with increasing frequency, new genres of documentary film such *An Inconvenient Truth* are serving as the foundation for “social media campaigns,” bringing together filmmakers with partner foundations, journalists, and progressive organizations. As I reviewed specific to Gore’s documentary and his more recent WE campaign, the framing of the film and the social media campaign matters to their reach, either connecting with and mobilizing a base audience of support or potentially reaching new audiences, expanding the scope of activity and engagement with an issue. On poverty-related issues, a relevant example was the film *Waging a Living*. Released as part of the 2006 season of the PBS series POV, the film chronicled the stories of minimum-wage workers. Leading up to its appearance on local affiliates, POV specifically targeted media efforts at news outlets in 17 states that had minimum-wage initiatives on the ballot in the 2006 election.

Comparative case study examinations of similar social media campaigns would provide valuable insight into how films can be used systematically and strategically and the role that framing plays in this process.

A Bridging Model for Knowledge into Action

What is common to the issues, media portrayals, initiatives, and new media forums reviewed in this chapter is that framing and storytelling plays an integral, foundational role. Yet, despite the heavy focus of most scholarly work in the field, the issues and themes addressed do not fit neatly—or even very well—into a narrow media effects paradigm. Instead, as Stephen Reese (2001, 2007) suggests, the reality of framing fits better when thought of as a “bridging model” of media scholarship and application, bringing together qualitative, quantitative, and interpretative methods; and psychological, sociological, and critical traditions; while connecting the academic and professional communities through media initiatives that address social problems.

What is important, however, is that there is internal consistency within this diverse arena of bridging approaches. In this direction, university scholars benefit from working with professionals, who can help scholars recognize relevant research questions and encourage them to articulate their conclusions in accessible language and formats, both of which abet the search for funding. Government agencies, experts, and nonpartisan advocacy groups can use the results of this bridging model of framing research to systematically design and target their messages, to structure their public education materials, to effectively engage with journalists and editors, and to organize more interactive public dialogue initiatives such as deliberative forums and town meetings, whether face-to-face or virtual. Journalists, film makers, and social media designers can use this information to craft novel, accessible, and relevant narratives for nontraditional audiences across media formats, expanding their audience reach and impact.

Notes

1. For background on these types of film campaigns, see a 2007 report from the Center for Social Media, available at http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/files/pdf/docs_on_a_mission.pdf.
2. My blog, *Framing Science*, can be found at www.scienceblogs.com/framing-science.
3. These talks were launched in part by the articles on the framing of science debates that I published in *Science*, the *Washington Post*, *The Scientist*, and *Environment*, respectively (Nisbet, 2009b; Nisbet & Mooney, 2007a; Nisbet & Scheufele, 2007).
4. Pan and Kosicki (1993) work from a “constructivist” perspective, which holds a different epistemological stance about the nature of frames than

- constructionism, the perspective from which Gamson and Modigliani (1989) work. The full nature of this debate does not concern us here, but constructivists hold that framing analysis “does not assume the presence of frames in texts independent of readers of the texts”—a view that differs from the constructionist stance that how an issue culture is produced and changed “needs to be accounted for in its own right, regardless of any claims that one might make about its causal effect on public opinion” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 2).
5. See Inhofe’s Senate Office “Skeptics Guide to Global Warming,” new releases, and blog. Retrieved from <http://epw.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?FuseAction=Minority.WelcomeMessage>.
 6. The *Time* cover is available at <http://www.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,20060403,00.html>.
 7. For example, see the transcript of the second 2004 Presidential Debate. Retrieved from http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/debate-ereferee/debate_1008.html.
 8. More on Clinton’s speech can be found at the Washington Post. com. Retrieved from http://blog.washingtonpost.com/44/2007/10/04/clinton_vows_to_end_assault_on.html.
 9. The Office of the President Elect (2008), “The Search for Knowledge, Truth and a Greater Understanding of the World Around Us.” Retrieved from http://change.gov/newsroom/entry/the_search_for_knowledge_truth_and_a_greater_understanding_of_the_world_aro/
 10. The *Time* cover can be retrieved from <http://www.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,20080428,00.html>.
 11. “War” is a commonly used metaphor and frame device across American politics. When the threat is defined as originating from a social group within American society, such as liberals’ alleged “war on Christmas” or conservatives’ alleged “war on science,” the metaphor polarizes views, communicates the differences between “us” and “them,” and rallies a particular social movement or ideological base. When used to point to an external existential or real threat such as the “war on terror,” “the Cold War,” “the war on cancer,” or the “war on global warming,” the metaphor results in national and societal unity, transcending ideological divisions, as Americans join to defend common values and self-interests (Nepstad, 2005).
 12. Bloomberg (2007, August 28). Address to the Brookings Center, Washington, DC. News from the Blue Room. Available at www.nyc.gov.
 13. In terms of activating core supporters for low income proposals, Democrats responded positively to all three frame treatments; in comparison, the responsible community planning frame generated slightly stronger support for specific policy.
 14. Greg Clark, “Poverty is Too Important an Issue to Leave to the Labour Party,” Conservative Home Blogs (see <http://www.tinyurl.com/wkjlo>). Clark’s convey image is borrowed from journalist Polly Toynbee’s book *Hard Work: Life in Low-Pay Britain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003; see also Polly Toynbee, “If Cameron Can Climb on My Caravan, Anything is Possible,” *The Guardian*, November 23, 2006. Retrieved from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Columnists/Column/0,1954790,00.html>). Somewhat ironically, in 2007 the UK Labour Party, under pressure from Conservatives, seemed to shift its frame toward a more traditional U.S definition of the issue, putting forward a proposal titled “Reforming Welfare to Reward Responsibility” and introducing “work for the dole” programs,

language that mirrors directly the mid-1990s U.S. welfare reform debate. This shift is an example of how frames often translate across national contexts, especially when there is shared political culture (see report at http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2008/08/uk_welfare.html).

15. Retrieved from http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2008/11/price_of_poverty.html.
16. Retrieved from http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2009/02/basic_needs_brief.html.
17. See the collected research of Demos and The Frameworks Institute. Retrieved from <http://www.demos.org/publicworks>

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