USE OF COGNITIVE AND CULTURAL FRAMING
IN THE COMMUNICATIONS OF
NON-DOMINANT GROUPS
by
Angela S. Richard

An Abstract
of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
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ABSTRACT

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The nature of mainstream mass media makes it one of the primary conduits for promulgation of dominant cultural values. When that dominant culture becomes so pervasive so as to become invisible to the majority of people in the society, it can be described as hegemonic. In the face of hegemony, subcultures and non-dominant groups with alternative points of view must find ways to communicate their issues and beliefs in ways that cut through the noise of the dominant culture in mass media. Utilizing knowledge about cognitive and cultural frames, which describe how people process information and make decisions, non-dominant groups can find effective strategies for persuasive communication. Theories from social science as well as literary and cultural critics are examined to gain insight in framing and communication. Two case studies that exhibit how non-dominant groups can use mainstream media persuasively and strategically are analyzed.
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Breaking through Hegemony

Even in the face of growing diversity in the United States according to demographics and ever increasing polarization in political and social discourse, America still has a dominant culture that is promulgated and maintained through multiple channels, most of which are outside the bounds of formal power. This is the textbook definition of hegemony\(^1\). Americans have a love/hate relationship with the idea of hegemony because of two of the most hegemonic beliefs that exist in American identity: We are a free society and our country originated when we resisted an oppressor. Regardless of the fact that the country has dealt with being the oppressor on several occasions—African slavery, native Americans, women’s rights, civil rights—the intact American narrative still portrays the United States as the “land of the free and the home of the brave.” This is just one example of how extremely powerful cultural narrative can be. Simply believing in the dominant narrative will greatly impact how a person interprets and understands historical and contemporary events, putting a different spin on the facts than maybe a person from another country or even a subculture within the United States would. Most people in the dominant culture are completely unaware of the influence this narrative, or cultural frame, has on how they see the world; the frame disappears and all they see is the “truth.” However, people in a subculture or from another culture are very aware of the cultural frame the dominant group is operating under—they must understand the dominant view in order to live in the society. These non-dominant groups must negotiate how they interact with the dominant culture, and frequently, that is where resistance against the hegemony starts to develop.

\(^1\) Hegemony according to James Lull: “A process through which dominant ideology is transmitted, consciousness is formed, and social power is exercised. The power or dominance that one social group holds over others. Rather than direct manipulation of people against their interests, hegemony depends on social actors accepting their subordinate status as normal. Ideology-dispensing institutions such as schools, government, business, and mass media reinforce each other by perpetuating the status quo as common sense” (285-6).
Communicating non-dominant or resistant ideas effectively to a dominant cultural audience is a high hurdle to clear, and the people in non-dominant groups who try to persuade others to see an issue from their alternative perspective frequently lose the battle if they resort to using the same methods of hegemonic promulgation and maintenance that the dominant culture does—namely the mainstream media in all its forms. The media, including news media and advertising, has become expert at persuasive communication using every literary and rhetorical device at its disposal to achieve its goals. The media creates identification and familiarity in its messages by using the language, symbols, metaphors, and images of the dominant culture, which creates a sort of shorthand for anyone who understands that cultural frame. In the 20th Century, the time and ratings pressures associated with radio and television caused media to rely even more on shorthand and less on substance and depth. This “shorthand” may be fine in a small, homogenous community, but it can start to be problematic when used pervasively in a large, open, heterogeneous society. These dominant cultural messages become so pervasive yet so embedded in most mainstream media that if a non-dominant group tries to express an alternative cultural viewpoint, the alternative message stands out in contrast as “wrong” and “off” even if the actual message is not that strange. This is just one of the mechanisms of hegemony that promotes the dominant cultural set of ideas while discouraging ideas that threaten to change the dominant status quo.

If non-dominant groups have difficulty communicating resistant or alternative ideas via normal means of communication, how can they effectively communicate in their effort to change the society they live in? The answer to this question lies in a complex evaluation of rhetoric and modern communication, with a specific focus on utilizing knowledge about cognitive and cultural frames to make rhetoric more persuasive and meaningful. While the focus on language
and rhetoric brings literary and cultural theorists like Raymond Williams and Kenneth Burke into the discussion, the impact of cognitive and cultural frames also brings social scientists into the mix. The evolving science on brain development, cognition, and social interaction provides broad support to theoretical literary concepts discussed and written about decades before research “proved” anything. Understanding the interaction between an individual and a culture is fundamental to figuring out how a person in a non-dominant group can communicate a non-hegemonic idea to the public. Finding rhetorical techniques that can help a non-dominant voice break through the noise of the dominant culture, especially while utilizing some form of mass media, could provide insight for subcultures to use in persuading others to accept their collective action or join their social movements.

To begin, I will provide some background on cognitive and cultural frames from a social science perspective. Next, I will discuss some of the literary theories that are applicable to understanding language and culture in the context of the power dynamic that plays out between groups within societies and the role rhetoric plays in changing a society. Moving from the pure theory to the application of theory, I will take a look at the use of cognitive and cultural frames in the mass media and advertising, especially examining how the frames have become pervasive beyond the media in the rhetoric of social and political movements. Finally I will highlight two case studies that exemplify a successful communication of non-dominant ideas using mass media but with enough of a difference to break through the noise of the hegemonic culture.

**The Basics of Cognitive Frames**

In his seminal 1974 work, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, Erving Goffman introduces the concept of cognitive frames to the field of sociology, and since
that time his ideas have been applied in a wide range of social sciences from economics to linguistics. Goffman’s ideas start with the concept of primary frameworks, which are perspectives that help humans make sense of the chaotic world around them. He writes that “each primary framework allows its user to locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences,” allowing the user to interpret and understand the meaning of the occurrences according to the frame (21). Most people are completely unaware of the frames at work in their brains, would not be able to describe their frames, but have absolutely no problem applying them in practical ways every day of their lives.2

As cognitive science has progressed, researchers have shown that these frames at work are not just abstract ideas floating around in the ether but are, as George Lakoff says, “embodied” because the structure of the brain actually changes with bodily experience and interaction with the physical environment (Women xiv). Once these frames are part of the brain’s circuitry, they can fire without the person even being conscious of it.3 The ability of our brain to operate unconsciously allows many things in life to work quickly and efficiently. Cognitive frames are just another example. When a person walks into a classroom, the frame

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2 Goffman does not explain where he thinks frames originate, but later researchers building on his work have theories about how primary frames are developed in early childhood development, even in infancy. George Lakoff, a linguistics professor at Stanford and expert on cognitive framing, talks about how infants learn simple pre-language frames that are the same around the world. In a 2012 presentation to the Big Ideas Conference, Lakoff says in all cultures, warm means affectionate while cold means aloof. How did those temperature terms come to be associated with those personality traits? An infant feels physically warm in her mother’s arms at the same time that she feels love. Both parts of her brain—the one associated with warmth and the one associated with affection—are activated simultaneously and repeatedly until they develop a circuit that becomes a primary frame, or a shortcut that always associates warmth with love. By the time a child is five years old, she has learned dozens if not hundreds of similar messages and created the associated circuits that mean those lessons have physically changed her brain forever.

3 In the physical world, we are comfortable with this concept. Many physical activities become absolutely unconscious and automatic; for example, we are watching a football game and see an exciting play. Without thinking about it, we may jump up, raise our fist in the air, shout, and clap our hands. That sequence of physical actions is incredibly complicated when considering the numerous muscle movements, balance, and coordination that these actions require; however, the person does not have to consciously think about any of those activities. If the person did think about each and every movement associated with those actions, the football game might be over before completing the above mentioned sequence.
associated with classrooms is activated. The person quickly knows what activity should be going on in the classroom, how the objects in the classroom should function, and what the roles are for various people. Based on the cognitive frame, the person can quickly assess this classroom and figure out where he or she should sit and how to interact with others.

While cognitive frames are integral to how our brains work, allowing us to function in the world, the embodied nature of the frames can present limitations as well (Lakoff, *Women*, xvi). Since frames provide the structure for understanding, if we see something too far out of our known frames, we either do not recognize it or we ignore it. In order for new information to be retained or understood, our brain must at least recognize the information through an existing frame. Another limitation is that we can develop frames based on incorrect information or dangerous ideas that we might find difficult to shed later in life. For example, an abused child may associate love with pain or degradation. That association is hardwired into the brain and will never go away. Later in life, the abused child as an adult can work at developing new circuits that bypass or work around that original circuit, but some circumstances, such as the name of the abuser or an associated smell, will always activate those original thoughts and feelings. The same process works for more complicated frames like racism, sexism, or sexual shame. No matter what our original frames are, as mature adults we must be vigilant to not let embodied circuits hijack our thinking.

Thus far, I have discussed frames as embodied cognitive processes. The fact is that frames are never very neat or consistent. Most people have competing and contradictory frames in their brains at all times, and through complex interactions with the social and physical environment, different frames can take precedence at different times, places, or situations. The mechanism for what switches the brain from one dominant frame to another is called a social or
primer cue. In “Framing Social Values: An Experimental Study of Culture and Cognition,” John Stolte and Shanon Fender highlight research studies that prove the existence of social cues in frame switching by focusing on bicultural subjects. In one study, groups of Chinese Americans were culturally cued either with iconic American symbols or iconic Chinese symbols. Depending on which symbols their brains were exposed to, the subjects interpreted a subsequent picture very differently.⁴ In other studies, language was used as the primer/cue instead of symbols, but the same cultural frame switching was observed. This switching occurs not only between cultures but also as a person “navigates varying subcultural boundaries within a national culture” (Stolte & Fender 63). In the experiment, different automatic cognitive frames took over the thought process when the subjects were exposed to various social cues or primers. In that very specific and controlled environment, switching does not seem dangerous, but in real life this switching happens all the time with inputs from mass media, social interactions, and physical environment. Because switching is automatic, people may not be aware of what is affecting their perceptions, and cultural biases can find their way in to perceptions without intention or consciousness.

One of the most important parts of Stolte and Fender’s research is their findings on the importance of narrative to frame switching. A central social cue in many of these experiments is dramatic narrative, which can promote emotional identification with the subject of the story. When listeners or readers becomes “empathetically engrossed” in a narrative, they are more

⁴ Stolte and Fender write: “In reference to a picture of one fish swimming in front of a school of other fish, the American iconic cue/primer caused subjects to attribute the fish’s behavior to an internal cause: subjects said the fish is leading the other fish. In contrast, the Chinese iconic cue/primer caused subjects to attribute the front fish’s behavior to an external cause: subjects reported that the front fish is being chased by the other fish. These results accord with other research, demonstrating a tendency for a person who has internalized western (“individualistic”) culture to lean toward making internal attribution and a tendency for a person who has internalized East Asian (“collectivist”) culture to lean toward making external attributions” (62).
likely to switch to a frame that is compatible with the depicted character. Stolte and Fender’s research showed that the vividness of the narrative affected the degree of identification, and the use of images in conjunction with a written story also enhanced the identification. These authors clearly show that the power of narrative and images to determine what cognitive frame takes precedence makes narrative and images powerful tools in getting people to look at an idea or situation in a particular way—in other words, they are powerful rhetorical tools.

Many people like to think of humans as rational, logical beings, and those people want to use statistics and facts to persuade others to accept their arguments. Unfortunately, only part of the human brain processes logic, and that part is not the part that works automatically most of the time. In *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Daniel Kahneman describes the two systems in the brain that work together. System 1 is the automatic system that controls impressions, perceptions, feelings, and reactions. System 2 is the system that “allocates attention to the effortful mental activities that demand it.” The two systems, however, do not operate independently, and System 2 is dependent on System 1 for attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions. If there is bias of any sort in System 1, System 2 will be working with faulty information. Kahneman won a Nobel Prize in 2002 for work completed in the 1970s on decision-making in uncertain circumstances because this idea of the rational mind being negatively affected by the automatic system was the basis for literally hundreds of other research projects. One of the biggest findings in Kahneman’s work is that people are bad at making predictions and estimations and, therefore, they are bad at making decisions based on having to make a prediction about something in the process of decision making. The System 1 part of the brain is programmed to avoid loss at almost any cost, so how a

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5 Kahneman completed the work with his long-time collaborator Amos Tversky, who would have shared in the Nobel honors if he had not died in 1996. “Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Theory Under Risk” is the foundational paper published in 1979.
choice is presented, or framed, changes how a person will respond to the choice. Kahneman’s work also proved that human brains have trouble conceiving numbers that are extremely large or extremely small, so trying to persuade a person of an argument using only statistics is not the best approach, even if the problem is a numbers problem. In order to influence public discourse in a persuasive way, people must be able to understand social cues and the meanings behind words, symbols, and images—things that the human brain understands automatically. Only through understanding what these cues will evoke in the audience can the communicator strategically utilize cognitive frames in the effective engagement of public discourse.

**The Basics of Cultural Frames**

Cognitive science may explain many universal frames as part of normal childhood development, but researchers are also concerned with the more complex frames that are less universal and more culturally specific. As a child matures and is socialized, simple cognitive frames start to aggregate into more complex webs of understanding, which are sometimes referred to as culture. According to Paul DiMaggio in “Culture and Cognition,” looking for the overlap between the individual perspective of psychology and the cultural perspective of sociology provides a great deal of insight into cognition. DiMaggio writes that he wants to “lay a foundation for a view of culture as working through the interaction of shared cognitive structures and supra-individual cultural phenomena (material culture, media messages, or conversation, for example) that activate those structures to varying degrees” (264). Similar to Lakoff’s and Kahneman’s ideas about how the brain works, DiMaggio provides a framework for understanding how cultural frames work in the brain in two distinct ways: automatic cognition and deliberative cognition.
The automatic cognition comes from “that culture, embedded in language and everyday practices” (DiMaggio 268). Using the term “schemata” instead of “frame,” DiMaggio writes, “This routine, everyday cognition relies heavily and uncritically upon culturally available schemata—knowledge structures that represent objects or events and provide default assumptions about their characteristic, relationships, and entailments under conditions of incomplete information” (269). These automatic processes affect how a person perceives and recalls information. In fact, an embedded schemata can actually filter information so that information that supports or is related to the schemata is perceived and recalled much more quickly and accurately than other information. According to DiMaggio, people can even falsely recall events that did not occur if they are part of their schemata. Among other uses, these ideas are vitally important in the understanding of stereotype and intergroup behavior.

However, much like the ability to work around dysfunctional cognitive frames learned in childhood, DiMaggio says that deliberative cognition provides a counterbalance to automatic cognition. With deliberative cognition, DiMaggio writes, “When sufficiently motivated, people can override programmed modes of thought to think critically and reflexively” (271). People can be motivated to change their frames when their attention is brought to an issue that concerns them, when they are dissatisfied with the status quo, or when their current frame no longer makes sense based on new information presented to them. Sometimes cultural or social movements can take advantage of these motivators in order to bring individuals into movements’ collective frames or move individuals to action.

While cognitive frames are primarily an individual experience, cultural frames are a complex interaction between individual and collective, where individuals do have agency to affect the collective. Robert Benford and David Snow’s influential article, “Framing Processes
and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment,” provides an in-depth look at collective action frames and their relationships to other concepts normally used to describe the ideas associated with social movements, like ideology. Social movements can use collective framing activities in the meaning construction process and use the frames to define a problem, assign blame, or suggest a solution. Language is at the heart of this meaning construction process because simply by defining a problem a certain way the issue is already limited to a particular set of causes and solutions. Lakoff in his presentation to the Big Ideas 2012 conference, “What Studying the Brain Tells Us about Arts Education,” provides an example of how Republicans defined, and thus framed, the problem surrounding the Jack Abramoff scandal in the early 2000s. Abramoff was a lobbyist who had broken many rules on behalf of his clients and spent a great deal of money on gifts, meals, and travel for members of Congress. As the scandal progressed, Republicans defined it as a “lobbyist” problem, which automatically limited solutions to dealing with lobbyists. Democrats accepted this wording and also used the label of “lobbyist” problem, but they could have just as easily decided to call it a “Congressional ethics” problem, which would put the focus of blame and solutions in a very different place. By framing the issue a particular way through language, one party was able to direct legislation the way it wanted.

Framing and meaning construction is not a one-way process. Benford and Snow write, “The very existence of a social movement indicates differences within a society regarding the meaning of some aspect of reality” (626). Each movement organized around an issue constructs

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6 Benford and Snow write: “Frames help to render events or occurrences meaningful and thereby function to organize experience and guide action. Collective action frames also perform this interpretive function by simplifying and condensing aspects of the ‘world out there,’ but in ways that are ‘intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists’ (Snow & Benford 1988:198). Thus, collective action frames are action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaign of a social movement organization (SMO)” (614).
its own meaning using framing. Even within social movements, different factions can agree on a problem but have “frame disputes” as to who to blame for the issue or what to do to resolve it. When social movements must position themselves in relation to another group, they must use counterframing activities to actually refute or discredit the ideas of the opposition groups while at the same time communicating their own groups’ coherent narrative. The degree of success that each group has depends on “the credibility of the framing” and “is a function of three factors: frame consistency, empirical credibility, and credibility of the frame articulators or claimsmakers” (Benford & Snow 619). Generally, the more credible a collective action frame’s narrative, the more persuasive the claim will be.7

Theories about Frames in Literary and Cultural Studies

Modern sociology and psychology provide insight into how the human brain works and how social movements interact with individuals, but in many respects the social sciences are simply confirming ideas that many literary and cultural theorists already thought to be true. The concept of collective social frames is similar to the concept of culture. The interaction between the individual and the collective can be observed in both culture and language. People are

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7 The persuasiveness is also enhanced by frame articulation, frame amplification, and frame alignment (Benford & Snow 623). Benford and Snow write:

Frame articulation involves the connection and alignment of events and experiences so that they hang together in a relatively unified and compelling fashion. Slices of observed, experience, and/or recorded “reality” are assembled, collated, and packaged. What gives the resultant collective action frame its novelty is not so much the originality or newness of its ideational elements, but the manner in which they are spliced together and articulated, such that a new angle of vision, vantage point, and/or interpretation is provided. (623)

Frame amplification is the emphasizing of certain issues or beliefs over others, providing a direction for the movement. Frequently, “these punctuated issues, beliefs, and events may function much like synecdoches, bringing into sharp relief and symbolizing the larger frame or movement of which it is a part” (Benford & Snow 623). Finally, frame alignment is simply the ability to “tap into existing cultural values, beliefs, narratives, folk wisdom, and the like” to take advantage of people’s “extant beliefs and values” to strengthen a collective action frame. Narrative is a fundamental piece to all three of these elements—frame articulation, amplification, and alignment—and is crucial to persuading people to join one social movement as opposed to another (Benford & Snow 623).
socialized simultaneously in their language and their culture, which are intertwined, so many observations about how language and communications work also apply to culture. According to sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas, “Since speech is the distinctive and pervasive medium of life at the human level, the theory of communication is the foundational study of the human sciences: it discloses the universal infrastructure of socio-cultural life” (qtd in Biesecker 88). Literary theorists agree. In “The Symbolic Inference; or, Kenneth Burke and Ideological Analysis,” Frederic Jameson writes:

Thus conceived, literary and cultural criticism takes its place among the social sciences, and the study of language and of aesthetic objects in general recovers something of the dignity it had for the founders of philology when their program foresaw the analysis of literary texts and monuments as a unique means of access to the understanding of social relations. (509)

The main difference between the social science and literary approaches is that while social sciences may observe behavior, literary criticism is firmly rooted in language. For example, in *Marxism and Literature*, Raymond Williams discusses the origins of the word “culture” and how the definition has changed over time. He also discusses how the study of language has evolved in the Western Hemisphere over the past few centuries. Both of these discussions support his overall critique of Marxism’s perceived shortcomings with respect to a lack of attention to the importance of language and individual agency. Williams recognizes language as an activity with socially-created definitions but with individual speech performance that provides meaning; these last ideas closely resemble Kenneth Burke’s ideas about language as symbolic action. Similar to Williams, Burke writes about language, social interaction, and individual agency that predates cognitive psychology by decades. Burke’s concept of “terministic screens” resembles closely
the cognitive frames described by Lakoff and Goffman. Therefore, I will focus primarily on Williams and Burke, with support from a few others, to discuss cognitive and cultural frames from the literary/cultural perspective.

**Raymond Williams**

In *Marxism and Literature*, Williams devotes the entire first chapter to defining and discussing the concept of “culture.” He writes that until relatively modern times, culture “was the growth and tending of crops and animals, and by extension the growth and tending of human faculties” (11). During the Enlightenment, the definition started to shift toward the modern understanding, which still has two competing meanings: “the arts” versus “ways of life.” At the heart of this tension is the argument about whether culture is prescriptive or descriptive. Since the words “culture” and “society” are often used interchangeably, this argument tries to settle whether broad economic and social forces, as proposed by Marx, determine people’s lives or if people have agency to influence or change the society in which they live. Williams definitely comes down on the side of agency, and he says to understand that agency we must turn to “the question of human language” (*Marxism* 20).

Through much of history, the study of language meant studying some ancient language—Greek, Hebrew, or Latin—that had fixed definitions, grammar, and usage. When linguistics as a science took off in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, its predominant focus was classifying non-European languages and finding root tongues. Again, the gaze was mostly backwards and from an outside perspective. Williams writes, “The major emphasis on language as activity began in the eighteenth century, in close relation to the idea of men having made their own society, which we have seen as a central element in the new concept of ‘culture’” (*Marxism* 21-
2). Instead of classifying dialects or individual utterances as deviations or errors as compared to some static standard, modern linguists started looking at language and speech more descriptively, even venturing into “major work in the physiology of speech and in the field significantly designated within this area as experimental psychology” (Williams, *Marxism*, 26). This important shift in research and thought accompanied another important developing concept—language is not a tool acquired by humankind to use but is a “constitutive faculty” (Williams, *Marxism*, 24). Supporting this concept are all the instances of language use when it is not purely functional or social. Humans have inner speech which they develop early in childhood to help them make sense of the world; the cognitive psychologists would say that “language” would include words, symbols, and images that all help the individuals understand, retain, and recall information—sounding a lot like cognitive frames.

However, Williams, even while promoting agency through language activity, acknowledges the importance of collective forces. Williams writes about V.N. Vološinov, whose work does a good job of describing the interaction between individual and collective language use. According to Williams, “Vološinov argued that meaning was necessarily a social action, dependent on a social relationship” (*Marxism* 36). Emphasizing how the individual develops through socialization, Vološinov said that “consciousness takes shape and being in the material of signs created by an organized group in the process of its social intercourse. The individual consciousness is nurtured on signs; it derives its growth from them; it reflects their logic and laws” (qtd. in Williams, *Marxism* 36). So the collective helps form the individual consciousness through a system of cultural language, but that language is not a fixed system

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8 Vološinov was a Soviet linguist who published his groundbreaking work, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, in two editions in 1929 and 1930 in Leningrad, but he then disappeared in the 1930s. His second edition was translated into English in the 1970s.
“given” to each member of society. Instead, real meaning is a product of both the formal definitions of words or symbols and the meaning added through the individual speech act. According to Williams, “[T]he fusion of formal element and meaning . . . is the result of a real process of social development, in the actual activities of speech and in the continuing development of a language” (*Marxism* 37). The inevitable result of the social interaction is shifting definitions in what Vološinov calls “an active social language” (Williams, *Marxism*, 37).

These ideas do contrast greatly with “orthodox philology” and “its studies of dead languages,” and obviously provide more useable knowledge for someone trying to understand, communicate, and persuade others in a living language.

**Kenneth Burke**

Kenneth Burke takes the examination of language to an even more fundamental level than Williams when in his “definition of man” he describes humankind as a “symbol-using animal.” In *Language as Symbolic Action*, Burke provides his own take on how language structures people’s perception of the world:

> [C]an we bring ourselves to realize just what that formula implies, just how overwhelmingly much of what we mean by “reality” has been built up for us through nothing but our symbol systems? Take away our books, and what little do we know about history, biography, even something so “down to earth” as the relative position of seas and continents? What is our “reality” for today (beyond the paper-thin line of our own particular lives) but all this clutter of symbols about the past combined with whatever things we know mainly through maps, magazines, newspapers, and the like about the present? In school, as they go
from class to class, students turn from one idiom to another. The various courses
in the curriculum are in effect but so many different terminologies. And however
important to us is the tiny sliver of reality each of us has experienced firsthand,
the whole overall “picture” is but a construct of our symbol systems. To meditate
on this fact until one sees its full implications is much like peering over the edge
of things into an ultimate abyss. And doubtless that’s one reason why, though
man is typically the symbol-using animal, he clings to a kind of naïve verbal
realism that refuses to realize the full extent of the role played by symbolicity in
his notions of reality. (5)

Burke found this passage so critical that he repeated the entire paragraph twice in the same book.
A few key Burkean concepts are introduced in this passage. First, Burke uses the word
“terminology,” which he uses for a specific language, dialect, or jargon particular to an activity
or group. Terminologies become an organizing principle; they are the source of terministic
screens, which are very similar to frames. Because terminologies frame the way a person thinks,
they also frame the way a person sees “reality.” According to Burke, “Even if any given
terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of
reality; and to this extent it must function as a deflection of reality” (45). Burke observes that
terminologies and terministic screens limit what people observe in the world around them in
much the same way that cultural frames define a problem using particular language and, thus,
limit the scope of causes and solutions.

A second important concept introduced in the passage from Burke is the fact that humans
are actually separated from reality by their symbols. Most of what people know is not from
firsthand experience and, therefore, has been learned through some symbol system. All symbol
systems are merely a representation of “reality” and, therefore, can change and be manipulated—
consciously or unconsciously—to lead different people to see the exact same “reality” in very
different ways. Because people are generally separated from reality, their thoughts and beliefs
can shift depending on context. Two political groups who “believe” that they are enemies during
a political campaign can become unified as one nation when attacked by a foreign power (Burke
51). The social scientists would say their frames shifted when cued by an outside situation—the
attack. Burke would say the people shifted from one terminology—members of a political
party—to another terminology—citizens of a nation. The “reality” of these people did not
change, but their perception of reality changed dramatically.

In contrast to many literary critics who looked at language as something pure and
abstract, Burke knew that language changed people and their behavior, and thus, the world.
While the social scientists would look at cognitive and cultural frames as one approach to
interpret people’s beliefs, attitudes and behaviors, Burke invented his own framework for
evaluating the social world around him. Burke’s process for evaluating the interactions of
people and their symbolic behavior was the dramatistic pentad: Act, Scene, Agent, Agency, and
Purpose. Burke’s “frame” is distinctly narrative in nature, using the terms and perspectives used
by literary critics to analyze dramatic narrative and applying it to cultural situations. Frederic
Jameson considers Burke’s pentad key to ideological analysis. Jameson writes, “Ideological
analysis may therefore be described as the rewriting of a particular narrative trait or seme as a
function of its social, historical, or political context” (511). Both Burke and Jameson agree that
language is not just symbolic, but meaning is multi-layered and multi-faceted. Many people say
that context determines meaning, but Jameson contends that every context or subtext is simply
another text that must be considered (511).
Both Burke and Jameson also both agree on the fundamental importance narrative plays in perception and cognition. Jameson writes: “If, therefore, narrative is one of the basic categorical forms through which we apprehend realities in time and under which synchronic and analytic thinking is itself subsumed and put in perspective, then we no longer have to be defensive about the role of culture and the importance of its study and analysis” (510). All the social scientists discussed here found that narrative resonated with people strongly, priming them to identify with the subject of the narrative and interpret information differently depending on the connection. We know that the narratives that influence us the most are those that we heard early in life and have influenced the development of our cognitive and cultural frames. The ideas of Burke and Jameson, while predating most of the social science research, confirm that stories play a vital role in language development, identity, and social interaction. Jameson writes:

[T]he very greatest critics of our time . . . are those who have construed their role as the teaching of history, as the telling of the tale of the tribe, the most important story any of us will ever have to listen to, the narrative of that implacable yet also emancipatory logic whereby the human community has evolved into its present form and developed the sign systems by which we live and explain our lives to ourselves. (523)
Case Study #1: Use of Satire on The Daily Show

While a discussion of cognitive and cultural framing is very interesting, I want to be able to glean practical applications and strategies that can be used by non-dominant groups who want to be heard by a wider audience. Non-dominant groups can hold meetings or produce niche publications where like-minded people discuss topics on which they basically already agree, but that is not the rhetorical hurdle that I want to help them clear. The more important and difficult task is to communicate to a larger audience—a potentially indifferent or hostile mass audience—and persuade them to at least consider an alternative point of view. While hegemony is powerful, it is not omnipotent, and representatives from subcultures can structure their communications in particular ways so as to be heard even in mainstream media formats.

A widely accepted method of communicating ideas that challenge the dominant cultural frame is satire (closely related to parody and irony). A person uses satire to expose the edges, contradictions, and possible absurdities of an accepted frame, but the exposure is tempered so that it is not a complete rejection or condemnation of all that the frame represents. This tempered approach makes the message palatable to others even when they do not agree with the satirist’s point of view. The speaker/satirist must understand the cultural frame well enough and portray it clearly enough that the audience recognizes the reference frame, or otherwise, the satire does not work as intended. Only in this context will the highlighted differences introduced in the satirical work or performance have the desired effect of social commentary or critique.

Satire, and its related forms parody and irony, is a fairly old rhetorical form that was originally “dedicated to teaching moral lessons” (Deer 712). In this original form, satire could well have been a means of hegemonic promulgation and maintenance of a dominant culture.
Over time, however, attitudes toward satire shifted as did its tone and use. In “Satire as Rhetorical Play,” Harriet and Irving Deer write that modern literary critics rejected the notion that satire was purely didactic and instead regarded it as an art form with “contemporary anti-establishment tendencies” (713). Although there are multiple examples of satire in various formats today, one of the most interesting related to the discussion of cognitive and cultural frames is the phenomenon of The Daily Show with Jon Stewart on Comedy Central. Since the long-running, award-winning, “fake” news show satirizes both the content of mass media and the medium itself, The Daily Show provides a fruitful area for examination.

How Frames have Structured the News Media

Before looking at a closer analysis of the The Daily Show, we must understand how frames function in the news media today and where the frames we all share come from. The American narrative about a “free press” being essential to a democracy is a very strong narrative that persists no matter how much evidence exists that the press is not really all that free or independent. The fact that freedom of the press is enshrined in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution gives the news media a privileged position in the society. Above all else, this “free press” narrative frames how all other facts about the news media are interpreted, and frequently, the abstract notion of the press is given the benefit of the doubt even when people have issues with specific journalists or specific media outlets.

The “news” media started out centuries ago as literally a simple forum to give notice, according to Raymond Williams (“Advertising” 411). The format was simply posters put up in public places or classified ads in printed newspapers. While there was a great deal of change during the Industrial Revolution with respect to the types of products advertised and the methods
of communication, it was not until the 1880s that the profession of advertising, and subsequently journalism, came into being (Williams, “Advertising,” 413, 416). It was not an accident that these two professions developed simultaneously; financially, they relied upon one another for their existence. Advertising took another leap forward after World War I when it started incorporating the psychology learned from the propaganda campaigns used during the war. The persuasiveness of the advertising and the importance of advertising to the financing of newspapers, and eventually radio and television, created a symbiotic relationship between news and commerce that is still hard to separate. Williams writes, “[A]t an increasing rate, [advertising] has passed the frontier of the selling of goods and services and has become involved with the teaching of social and personal values; it is also rapidly entering the world of politics” (“Advertising” 421). The same framing process at work in the news media has spilled over into other important areas, such as politics and social movements, and that accentuates the importance of understanding the use of frames in communications for any group trying to question or resist hegemony.

At the most basic level, both cognitive and cultural frames are used to organize information. The modern news relies on frames shared by the general public to communicate information quickly and efficiently. In “We Frame to Please: A Preliminary Examination of The Daily Show’s Use of Frames,” Penina Wiesman writes, “As a way to organize large amounts of information for presentation, frames are an ideal tool for News9 programming because they offer predictable categories of interpretation that help to simplify the journalist’s job” (134). However, the process of using frames both from a process point of view (what stories are chosen) and a

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9 Wiesman uses a capital letter to differentiate the news, representing the content, and the News, representing the media through which the content is presented.
content point of view (which details are included and excluded) provides a great opportunity for bias and manipulation either from journalists or their sources, or from the media culture itself.

The most well-meaning journalist who aims to be objective will find that through the simple process of reporting a particular point of view will be presented. The journalist will decide who to interview, what facts to include, what images to use, what order to present the information in, and what can be cut when faced with limited space or time. In Press Effect: Politicians, Journalists, and the Stories that Shape the Political World, Kathleen Jamieson and Paul Waldman write, “Frames tell us what is important, what the range of acceptable debate on a topic is, and when an issue has been resolved. By choosing a common frame to describe an event, condition, or political personage, journalists shape public opinion” (xiii). Journalists use common frames to weave facts into dramatic narratives because they know that narratives are what people connect to and remember better than a recitation of facts. And even well-meaning, ethical journalists want their stories to be read and appreciated, so they will do what they can to make them readable and memorable. Even in the best case scenario, journalists cannot help but introduce their own beliefs, ideologies, and biases through the process of reporting despite their best efforts to be objective.

Individual journalists are working in a media culture with its own highly structured rules and frames. The media may technically be a subculture based on numbers, but if the media influence is measured, its culture becomes one of the most dominant in the greater society. According to Wiesman:

[S]tructural and rhetorical processes of frame construction give these [media] organizations an additional degree of power. The rhetorical ability to trigger
extant knowledge constructs and cultural beliefs is a key element of a frame’s power over audience reactions . . . Moreover, because structurally News frames literally “determine the content of the news,” they control what constitutes reality for the average citizen. (134)

The fundamental importance of language, just like Raymond Williams and Kenneth Burke described in their theories, is behind the power of the media. In “Encoding, Decoding,” Stuart Hall writes, “Reality exists outside language, but it is constantly mediated by and through language: and what we can know and say has to be produced in and through discourse” (511). In many ways, the media is responsible for the public discourse and, therefore, responsible for what people think of as reality. Other groups, movements, and cultures have seen the power that the media wields and have adapted their communications strategies to better fit in with the goals and priorities of the media. When a potential source provides information in a format that is conducive to what a journalist wants in the final product—namely facts woven into a dramatic narrative—that source has much greater influence over what eventually appears in the media and therefore more influence over the public discourse.

When political groups or social movements become savvy about how to use the media to their advantage, the strategies they utilize focus on frame building to increase the effectiveness of their communications. First, these groups carefully define the language they want used when discussing the issues that are important to their group. Similar to George Lakoff’s ideas about how limiting sources of blame and possible solutions depends on how a group defines a problem, Jamieson and Waldman write, “Because the terms we use to describe the world determine the ways we see it, those who control the language control the argument, and those who control the argument are more likely to successfully translate belief into policy” (xiv). In addition to
defining a preferred language, a group must also create a dramatic narrative to promote its beliefs or ideology. Based on what we learned about the primacy of narrative and identification in cuing frames (and the fact that automatic thinking often trumps deliberative, logical thinking), the narrative of a group does not always have to fit neatly with the facts. According to Jamieson and Waldman, “As communication scholar Oscar Gandy wrote, frames ‘are used purposively to direct attention and then to guide the processing of information so that a preferred reading of the facts comes to dominate public understanding’” (xiii). However, that preferred reading does not have to be completely consistent with the truth. Jamieson and Waldman continue: “The critical variable is usually not the facts themselves but the manner in which they are arranged and interpreted in order to construct narrative describing the political world” (xiv). With the dominant culture, the gap between the hegemonic narrative and the facts is the place where satire can frequently find its material for humor and social commentary.

While most of the theories about media until this point have been broad enough to include all formats, television, the particular focus of *The Daily Show’s* satire, has its own unique cultural frames and theories. The most obvious, but most significant, difference between newspapers and television news is the layer of complexity added by visual and audio signs on top of language. According to Stuart Hall, “The televisual sign is a complex one. It is itself constituted by the combination of two types of discourse, visual and aural” (511). Because the televisual media communicates on multiple levels simultaneously, the person initiating the communication must be even more sensitive to the multiple meanings and connotations of sounds, symbols, and other signifiers. Of course, it is through the use of hegemonic signs and symbols that the dominant culture can promulgate its cultural beliefs and ideology; it is yet another level of communication that the non-dominant group must be aware of when trying to
address the dominant group with non-dominant ideas. Hall writes, “Certain codes may, of course, be so widely distributed in a specific language community or culture, and be learned at so early an age, that they appear not to be constructed—the effect of an articulation between sign and referent—but to be ‘naturally’ given” (511). It is imperative for non-dominant groups, especially satirists, to look past these “naturally given” codes and see them for the social constructs that they are.

Another unique issue of television news is the fact that it reaches a much bigger and broader audience than any single newspaper or magazine. While news organizations with smaller audiences may be free to participate in niche journalism or take extremely antagonistic points of view in their articles, the market pressure of a large television news program changes the tone and content of the news presented. In *On Television*, Pierre Bourdieu writes, “Enslaved by audience ratings, television imposes market pressures on the supposedly free and enlightened consumer. These pressures have nothing to do with the democratic expression of enlightened collective opinion or public rationality, despite what certain commentators would have us believe” (67). Bourdieu believed by having to appeal to such a wide audience, television had to water down the news and become depoliticized so as to not offend people. He writes, “It suits everybody because it confirms what they already know and, above all, leaves their mental structures intact” (45). It does not challenge widely held cultural frames—or the hegemonic frames—but reinforces them so as to stay in the good graces with the majority of viewers. In many ways, this pressure contradicts the democratic narrative that a free press is necessary to the functioning of a free society. If the “free” press does not actually provide information necessary for citizens to make informed decisions, then the press is not functioning as it should, according
to our national narrative. Satirists frequently use this area as fertile ground for social commentary as well.

One of the most damaging frames people are subjected to repeatedly is the frame that modern television news thrives upon—the problem frame. In “The News Media, the Problem Frame, and the Production of Fear,” David Altheide writes, “The mass media in general, and especially the electronic news media, are part of a ‘problem-solving machine’ geared to entertainment, voyeurism, and the ‘quick fix’ rather than . . . understanding and social change” (647). Journalists use the problem frame as a narrative device so that they can present facts as an issue, assign blame, and propose a solution all in a short news segment. Obviously, the push to frame all issues as a problem with simple causes and solutions creates a lack of substance and complexity in the news media. This situation also creates a mindset in viewers where they can no longer gauge for themselves what the really important issues are in society. According to Altheide, many researchers have found that “the media contribute to political agendas as well as to people’s perceptions and interests in everyday life,” and they shape “the relative importance Americans attached to various national problems” (649-50). In addition to setting the agenda for Americans, journalists use the images and words associated with the problem frame to cue cognitive and cultural frames that then become dominant as they perceive and interpret information unrelated to the news media, potentially affecting how people behave in the real world and make decisions that affect themselves and others. The frame switching effects described by Stolte and Fender come into play in this situation. According to Altheide, “The driving force of the news coverage, however, can actually distort understanding of the issues, leading politicians, funding agencies, academic disciplines, and even agency personnel who actually deal with the alleged problem to make adjustments that are counterproductive” (655). It
is not uncommon for someone to say that an issue cannot really be a problem unless it has received coverage in the mainstream media. This is why many non-dominant groups who do try to communicate issues outside the mainstream media find no traction because their issue is given no credibility when it is not covered by the accepted media outlets.

While many people today are fully aware that media outlets are owned by corporations, influenced by advertisers, and organized around the problem frame, human brains are faced with an almost impossible task—comparing isolated facts with dramatic narrative. As discussed in both the social science and literary sections of this paper, narrative frequently trumps truth in our human brains. The emotional overrides the logical. So although we are aware of the shortcomings of the news media, the rhetorical and structural techniques used on the news programs convince us that what we are seeing is really true.

The Daily Show Analysis

Television news frames have developed so completely and spread so pervasively that most people are not even aware that there are frames at work, much as Stuart Hall indicates when he talks about codes as seemingly “naturally given.” For example, if an American were suddenly dropped in a non-English-speaking foreign country and was able to flip through the available television channels, the displaced American would only need seconds to identify news programs as opposed to other types of programming because the frame for what television news programs look and sound like has spread throughout the world. However, if that same displaced American were asked to explain why television news shows look the way they do to someone who has never seen a news show, the person might find that an impossible task. The best explanation offered might be, “News shows look this way because that’s the way they’ve always
looked.” Of course, this is not truly the explanation behind the look and sound of television news, where every symbol and sign provides some layer of meaning to the overall tone and authority of the show. Regardless of the particular day’s content, the medium projects certain beliefs and assumptions about itself daily, spreading self-perpetuating ideology about the authority and trustworthiness of the journalists and presenters seen on television news programs. This visual message of authoritative power is one of the reasons mainstream news media is a significant player in the promulgation of hegemonic cultural ideas.

When *The Daily Show* takes on the outward trappings of the regular news media, with the anchor sitting behind a desk talking directly to camera, it visually takes on the same cultural authority of the “real” news. In “Breaking News: A Postmodern Rhetorical Analysis of *The Daily Show,*” Aaron Hess writes, “*The Daily Show* operates as structural parody in the sense that it appropriates the common structure of news reporting, including special reports, breaking news, and headlines” (163). However, the show uses that visual image of authority juxtaposed with vulgar language or outrageous skits of “on-the-scene” reporters to create the irony and humor for which it is well-known. Another favorite are the montages of real news broadcasters saying things that taken out of context, or put into a different context, make the real news sound ridiculous.¹⁰ Hess writes that the show’s “subversive use of irony, parody, and satire” creates “an element of social critique through ridicule” (153, 155). He describes the simple definition of parody as “repetition with difference” with the difference being “constructed through the trope of irony” (154). Satire tends to deal with social commentary while parody focuses more on “textual

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¹⁰ Hess writes, “On the February 10, 2010 episode, The Daily Show reported on the large snowstorm that hit the east coast of the United States. Stewart, displaying the program’s usually ridiculous use of language about the storm, began to call it ‘snowmageddon’ and ‘snowpocalypse’ but interrupts himself with clips of news agencies calling the storm exactly those terms. Eventually, Stewart ‘one-ups’ the news agencies making up ‘snowtorious B.I.G.’ with a graphic of a dancing snowman to boot. Of course, he then cuts to CNN who has him beat already by quoting a comment to the CNN message boards on the air of ‘snowtorious B.I.G.’ Stewart gives up and reverts to calling the weather ‘unusually large snow storm’” (161).
form and genre” (157). So while *The Daily Show* borrows the visual trappings of the “real” news, the show is communicating its point of view through the differences.

One of the most obvious differences between *The Daily Show* and the “real” news is the use of the comic frame in addition to the other television news frames at work. According to Penina Weisman, while Jon Stewart and the writers of the show are communicating social commentary through satire, parody, and irony, their goal above all others is to be funny (136). The show achieves the humor in many different ways, but the writers never sacrifice humor for political or social commentary—this is why the satire is mixed with parody and irony.  

According to the definitions above, parody and irony can be funny without having to present social critique. Of course, the subject matter the show tackles provides rich material to satisfy both the comic frame and the desire for social critique. Wiesman writes:

> [T]he acknowledgement that *The Daily Show*, just like the institutions it critiques, uses framing may initiate a beneficial shift in the status of the framing process itself. So often, framing is discussed as a one of News’ fatal flaws which *The Daily Show* has worked hard to expose. However, the recognition that *The Daily Show* also relies on frames (comic or otherwise) highlights the fact that framing is, to some extent, a necessary element of news presentation. Although News framing often results in misled audiences, it is important to distinguish that not all framing is performed with malicious intent to control perception, nor does the use of framing, by definition, determine the exclusion of pertinent information. (149)

By appropriating the style and structure of the “real” news while giving the audience glimpses of the “inherent flaws of the news industry,” Stewart helps viewers deconstruct the news media
frames that most people have become blind to (Hess 160). According to Wiesman, “[I]t can be (and has been) argued that The Daily Show’s audiences learn to be aware of the constructed nature of packaged information from News and politicians, and are judged to be better off for it” (132). This comic approach accomplishes two very important rhetorical achievements. First, people of many different ideologies watch The Daily Show simply because it is a comedy show that pokes fun at topical issues, politicians, and the mainstream news media. The comic entertainment value attracts the audience and creates identification between Stewart because most people have harbored similar critical thoughts about one issue or another at some time in their life. Second, the fact that the show is a “fake” news show on Comedy Central gives it a defense when critics want to attack the show or Stewart for a lack of journalistic credibility or biased coverage.¹¹ Usually the critics attacking the show end up looking ridiculous for trying to apply normal news media standards to a show that is obviously not intended to be the news. Both of these rhetorical advantages obtained through the comic frame allow the social critique of the satire to find an audience when the same message packaged differently may not find such a large and receptive audience.

¹¹ Weisman writes, “The most famous example, cited by a number of articles, occurred during [Stewart’s] 2004 appearance on the now defunct CNN program Crossfire . . . After levying an unexpected attack on the program, host Tucker Carlson countered by criticizing Stewart for not asking tough questions of then presidential candidate John Kerry when he appeared on The Daily Show. Stewart responded with the now famous, ‘You’re on CNN. The show that leads into me is puppets making crank phone calls’” (136).
Case Study #2: Creating Alternative Narrative with Documentary Precious Knowledge

The Daily Show’s satire provides a platform for both comedy and social critique, and the show’s popularity has allowed it to create a loyal audience who tunes in even if they do not agree with every piece of social commentary presented. Because The Daily Show is not associated with a particular social or political issue, it has a great deal of freedom to play with format and content as long as it continues to deliver great entertainment to its audience. In many ways through its success and duration, The Daily Show has become more “mainstream” and accepted by the wider news media. However, very few non-dominant groups will find themselves in a similar position and, therefore, they must turn to other methods for communicating their ideas to a wider audience.

Considering the vital impact narrative contributes to increasing identification and cuing sympathetic cultural frames, a non-dominant group can use narrative on film as a means of communicating a message to an audience who may not normally be receptive to the same message packaged as a newspaper article or political speech. Because film can tap into the visual and aural as well as the language parts of the brain, this medium is filled with possibility. A case study that exemplifies particularly well the power of film to communicate non-dominant ideas when other media formats had failed is the documentary film Precious Knowledge, which follows the struggle of students in the Tucson, Arizona high schools to preserve their Mexican American studies (MAS) classes from being eliminated by a social movement with much more political power and more effective communications—initially.

The Arizona ethnic studies fight was situated inside a bigger discussion about national identity and how the United States defines what it means to be an American. Historically, how the dominant culture defines national identity has a great effect on acceptance of immigrants and
assimilation of minority cultures into the dominant culture. In "Becoming '100% American': Negotiating Ethnic Identities through Nativist Discourse," Dina Gavrilos writes, “The hegemonic power of national identity lies in how it is socially constructed to seem inherently unified, evoking long-ago origins, traditions and immutability, even though national identities are ongoing discursive constructions, contingent upon social relations of power” (97). The American “melting pot” is a myth as there is not really one American culture, despite what some social movements would like people to believe. However, any effort to control a minority population would start with controlling the speech of identity as the majority recognizes the potentially subversive power of speech.

When a dominant culture is using discourse to control national identity, define citizenship, and limit speech of the minority culture, the situation usually calls for control of the educational system. In "The 'Immigrant Problem': Modern-Day Nativism on the Web," Deneesh Sohoni writes, “Foucault (1980) describes how ‘discourses’—or ways of thinking and talking about topics—shape what constitutes ‘knowledge’ at particular historical times” and “stresses that what is considered ‘knowledge’ reflects the power of individuals or groups to determine cultural meanings” (828). The dominant group in Arizona put themselves in a position to control the discourse, especially relating to American history and national identity, in the schools.

However, another important part of the Marxist theory is the fact that wherever there is domination there will also be resistance. All of the efforts by the dominant culture to preserve their constructed culture and power positions are met with efforts by those minority groups who want national identity to be re-defined to include them.

Starting in 2008, the primary leaders behind the push to outlaw ethnic studies were Tom Horne, then state Superintendent of Public Instruction, and John Huppenthal, state senator and
Horne’s eventual successor as superintendent. Horne and Huppenthal organized their political allies and honed a very clear message—ethnic studies classes were un-American because they divided children by race and taught hate. With this message repeated throughout multiple channels of media, these leaders were able to dominate the public discourse. They had formal situational power, access to the media, alliances with powerful political groups, and mastery of the language that connected emotionally with many people in Arizona. At the same time, illegal immigration was a hot-button issue in the state, and the leaders against ethnic studies could use the momentum from the illegal immigration debate to fuel the ethnic studies discussion. The facts did not matter, only perception, and the MAS program was losing the perception war.

What was the MAS Program up Against?

The supporters of the MAS program were fighting an uphill battle because the local dominant culture in Arizona already held particular notions about what Mexican Americans were like, and the movement against ethnic studies used people’s cultural frames and stereotypes to craft a highly effective message. The mere existence of a stereotype in a person’s mind affects that person’s expectations and perceptions about members of the other group and influences behavior toward the other group. Cognitive bolstering is a process by which our brains search out “proof” to justify or rationalize beliefs we hold (Snyder 184). This process can lead to preferential remembering and selective reinterpretation—both of which preference facts or details that support the stereotype while discounting those which conflict with the stereotype (Snyder 186). This is the same process that DiMaggio describes with embedded schemata being able to filter information to support existing schemata (or frames). The social impact of these cognitive frames occurs when behavior is affected by beliefs. The person with the stereotype
acts in a particular way, and the other person will often react in a predictable way. In “On the Self-Perpetuating Nature of Social Stereotypes,” Mark Snyder writes, “Social stereotypes may create their own social reality by channeling social interaction in ways that cause the stereotyped individual to confirm the stereotype behaviorally” (193). If the dominant cultural group holds particular stereotypes about a non-dominant group, the subculture may find it very difficult to counter the beliefs of the dominant group members who believe they see confirmation of their beliefs, whether accurate or not. Therefore, appealing to the dominant group based solely on facts and statistics may not be convincing because of the emotional weight that strongly held beliefs hold over people’s logical thoughts, especially when they believe their stereotypes have been confirmed through personal observation.

Another persuasive approach that is not often successful in appealing to the other group, or the person holding the stereotype, is arguing on moral grounds. Human brains are built to protect and defend the beliefs they already have, more so than listening to logic and looking for truth. Using morality as an argument to convince an opposition group that they are wrong will almost never have the desired effect. This defensive mechanism was another wall that MAS supporters were initially throwing themselves against with no success. One of the unintended consequences of having made so much progress in changing the worst of people’s racial stereotypes in the latter part of the 20th century is that now bias has been mostly driven underground. Basically “good” people who do not discriminate against people of other races or nationalities are often afraid to look at biases that still exist in their thinking or beliefs. In many ways, fighting racism and racial bias today is more difficult than it was in the 1960s when Jim Crow was out in the open for everyone to see. Mixed up in the discussion of racial bias is also socioeconomic bias, which obviously cuts across racial boundaries. Today, racial bias can be
hidden behind discussions about economic stability, homeland security, and terrorism. People’s attitudes about race are often built into their cultural frames and become part of their automatic thinking process, which makes it difficult for them to see and acknowledge.

Unfortunately, the supporters of the MAS program initially approached the public discourse with both statistics about the program’s success, which was undeniable, and moral justification based on the history of racial discrimination in the Tucson area of Mexican Americans. Their arguments were coherent and logical, but they just were not persuasive, especially to an audience that did not start out as supporters of ethnic studies. As long as the supporters of the MAS program relied solely on facts and moral justifications, they were losing dreadfully in the rhetorical effort to communicate their beliefs to the dominant culture. They were working against people’s frames instead of using knowledge about frames to communicate effectively.

What had the Opposition Done to be Successful?

The movement to eliminate the MAS program was successful in its communication efforts because most of their strategies worked with the cognitive and cultural frames of their target audience. Once again, we can turn to social science to provide insight into rhetorical practices. This time, the cognitive science behind stereotypes and intergroup behavior provides explanation for how a group can build cohesion and dominate the public discourse by creating a narrative of “us” versus “them.” In “Perceiving Persons as a Group: Categorization and Intergroup Relations,” David Wilder discusses certain group dynamics that encourage the in-group/out-group binary, namely deindividuation, a lack of cognitive complexity, and a presence of a high level of arousal (Wilder 234, 236, 238). The group opposed to ethnic studies was able to use all three of these traits to advantage.
First, deindividuation, or making the opposition anonymous, is one strategy that Horne followed relentlessly through his campaign. Wilder writes, “Persons who are relatively deindividuated are more likely to be targets of aggression than are persons of whom we have greater knowledge” (234). Horne never went to the MAS classes despite repeated invitations to see things for himself. He came up with excuses for why he would not visit, but the underlying fact is that it is much easier to vilify an anonymous group of students and teachers than to do it to their faces. Horne never mentioned any teacher, administrator, or community leader that supported ethnic studies by name. During one telling press conference, Horne used a blown-up picture of the Tucson Brown Berets at a protest to exemplify the whole opposition as militant and radical. The few students in the picture, representing just a small portion of those at the protest, were wearing brown uniforms, bandanas over their faces, sunglasses, and berets. Horne’s emphasis on the sinister nature of their covered faces and the connection to what is taught in the ethnic studies classes is using deindividuation to the extreme.

Next, Horne exhibits, at least publicly, a lack of cognitive complexity. According to Wilder:

> [P]ersons who are low in complexity have difficulty handling complex and ambiguous information. They try to organize the environment into a few simple categories, thereby obscuring both differences and subtle similarities among stimuli that the cognitively complex individual might note. (236)

Much of the opposition’s narrative is firmly based on binaries like American/un-American or fallacious assumptions like “talking about race equals racism.” Horne is famous for talking about the fact that he was present at Martin Luther King, Jr.’s March on Washington. He uses one quote from Dr. King’s speech—“to be judged by the content of their character instead of the
color of their skin”—as a justifying statement for eliminating ethnic studies classes. Horne’s interpretation and use of this quote is obviously a simplistic reading of that speech and ignores much of what Dr. King said and wrote, especially his letter from the Birmingham jail. Horne’s platitudes do not actually fix anything, but they do make him sound like his intentions are coming from a good place. More importantly, they fit into that American narrative of the United States as a place of equal opportunity. However, the lack of cognitive complexity means that Horne views the country currently as the land of opportunity, and if someone does not succeed, it is because of personal failure. That belief puts him squarely on the opposite side from the supporters of ethnic studies who recognize institutional and cultural biases that still make America an uneven playing field, a non-dominant belief that unfortunately contradicts one of the country’s favorite patriotic narratives.

Finally, the level of arousal that existed in the state of Arizona at the time of this fight was at its height and created an environment where no one could look to the other side and see anything but opposition. Wilder writes, “Kahneman (1973) has observed that heightened arousal narrows one’s focus of attention and decreases one’s capacity to process information from the environment” (238). This state of arousal actually affected both sides of the movement; many supporters of ethnic studies automatically labeled someone who was not behind the fight as a racist. On the other side, the lines blurred between Latino citizens and illegal immigrants, and anyone of a certain appearance was thought to be “not American.” According to Wilder, “Turning to the ingroup/outgroup situation, one would predict that aroused persons should oversimplify their social environment by collapsing others into groups and failing to note fine distinctions among them” (238). Fears flew that Mexicans were secretly plotting to take back the Southwest for Mexico. Fear and hatred spun out from the heated and polarized debate. That
level of arousal made it nearly impossible for either side to listen to the opposition, and common ground was not something either side could conceptualize.

These three aspects of intergroup behavior helped the communication of the dominant group gain the upper hand and helped either silence the supporters of the MAS program or make their communication efforts ineffective, at least initially. Understanding what the dominant group was doing to neutralize the supporters of ethnic studies helps focus our attention on just what the documentary film *Precious Knowledge* did to counteract the strengths of the dominant group’s rhetorical techniques.

**Documentary Film as Social Movement**

By definition, a social movement is more than just a group of people who believe similarly about an issue or group of issues; a movement must be organized. In the beginning of the ethnic studies debate in Arizona, Tom Horne and the opposition were highly organized and utilized all the rhetorical tools available to a social movement. Unfortunately in the beginning of this fight, supporters of ethnic studies could not be called a movement because they lacked real organization. Over time, the supporters developed organization, and they, too, were able to utilize the rhetorical might of a true social movement, particularly centered on the film *Precious Knowledge*.

The opposition had a rhetorical advantage at the start—the *kairos*. *Kairos* includes the opportune time, place, and rhetorical situation, and in Arizona in the mid-2000s, the advantage went to the movement that wanted to reinforce “American” values. As discussed above, the more general political situation in Arizona was such that people were not predisposed to give ethnic studies the benefit of the doubt if its values were called into question. In order to take
advantage of the rhetorical situation, Horne and the opposition movement had to have a compelling narrative. He and his associates said that radical, anti-American socialists had taken over the MAS program in the Tucson school district and were indoctrinating the students to hate white people and feel like victims. This narrative fed into the existing belief about the liberal bias in schools and the existing fears that some people had about Mexicans trying to take back the Southwest for Mexico. The narrative contained enough elements that people already believed to be true that they had no problem believing the entire story.

After developing a compelling narrative, the movement used the rhetorical device of repetition. The opposition members kept the story simple and told it repeatedly. The public heard the story not just from Horne but from many sources; people start to believe something when they hear it coming from different sources, especially trusted authority figures. Political advisors have known this truth for a long time—even a lie if repeated enough times will start to sound true. Horne and his associates had access to the media, so the message was on television, on radio, in the newspaper, and on the internet. Many people blindly believe what they hear in the media, especially if it supports what they already believe. The media blitz gave Horne and his social movement a tremendous advantage in the beginning. The opposition completely owned the public discourse about ethnic studies, and the supporters were on their heels.

When the supporters of ethnic studies did try to engage the opposition early in the struggle, the teachers and students found that the opposition would not truly engage with them. The opposition had been able to define the issue in a way advantageous to their side, so they would not allow themselves to engage with supporters on any issues they defined as irrelevant. In the film *Precious Knowledge*, one scene shows public remarks in front of a state senate committee. A Tucson school district administrator approached the microphone and talked about
the educational success of the students in the MAS program. John Huppenthal, then state senator, reacted by basically ignoring what was said about the educational benefits of the program and said, “It doesn’t matter because those teachers are doing something wrong in those classrooms.” By framing the debate and refusing to allow the issue to be discussed on any terms except those advantageous to their side, the opposition owned the debate.

However, the public figures associated with the opposition to ethnic studies did not want to be seen as racist or insensitive. For the most part, they were politicians in Arizona and could not afford to completely alienate all Latino voters. So the opposition utilized another modern rhetorical device—pandering—to win potential adversaries to their side. Horne would say, “Latino parents don’t want their children taught this radical anti-American ideology.” Or he would say, “We want to treat every student as an individual and not divide students by race.” These targeted messages worked because as seen in the film, several Mexican Americans did speak out against ethnic studies. The fact that Latinos were part of the opposition movement only gave the movement credibility as a sincere movement without racist tendencies.

With all these rhetorical advantages, it is no wonder that the opposition was able to pass the bill in 2010 banning ethnic studies in Arizona public schools. They were able to convince the state legislature that the following banned activities were not only possible but actually occurring in schools:

A school district or charter school in this state shall not include in its program of instruction any courses or classes that include any of the following:

1. Promote the overthrow of the United States government.
2. Promote resentment toward a race or class of people.
3. Are designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group.
4. Advocate ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals.

(Arizona 2)

The opposition was actually able to convince enough people that a public high school was teaching the overthrow of the government because the opposition had an organized social movement with a sound rhetorical strategy aimed at taking advantage of a timely situation.

While supporters were ineffective in preventing the passage of the law, since that time the organization of the movement has grown tremendously. The centerpiece of the social movement could be said to be the film *Precious Knowledge*. One of the greatest impacts of the film is the reframing of the ethnic studies issue in the public discourse. From the beginning of the film, three students are introduced and we see them in their homes and neighborhoods as well as in school. These personal stories increase the viewers’ identification with the students at the heart of this controversy, and as Burke noted, identifying with the students shifts the viewers’ framing of the situation. Suddenly the anonymous “rude” students have faces and stories. This counteracts the deindividuation; portraying people as individuals “may enhance our favorability toward them” (Wilder 235). Next, the film gives the history of Chicano students at TUSD, and then the film shows what goes on in the MAS classrooms. The first twenty minutes of the film go by without a mention of a controversy or debate. The film creates its own compelling narrative and frames the issue as a civil rights and education issue.

Once the film does introduce the controversy, the filmmakers actually allow both sides to be heard. Interestingly, both Tom Horne and John Huppenthal participated in the making of the documentary giving on-camera interviews. Much like the pandering that the opposition used to avoid looking racist, the filmmakers go out of their way to appear fair in their portrayal of the opposition.
One of the strongest devices used by the filmmakers is allowing the viewer to witness the oppositions’ rhetoric in contrast to the actual events they are describing. The visual argument is much more compelling and convincing than a statement calling Horne’s truthfulness into question would have been. The film shows footage from a student protest, allowing the viewer to see how many students were there and for how long. Only near the end of the protest does a small group of Brown Berets arrive to stand in solidarity with the students. The film then cuts back and forth between the actual protest and a press conference where Horne is describing the protest. He uses a three-foot wide blown-up photograph of just the Brown Berets to represent the whole protest, and he portrays all the students as militant and radical. In many ways, the filmmakers are exposing the frame that Horne was constructing, much like *The Daily Show* exposes the contradictions inherent in mainstream television news. The filmmakers allow the viewer to judge for themselves if Horne’s words are justified, exaggerated, or straight out lies.

Since *Precious Knowledge* was first screened in the spring of 2011, it has become the organizing touchstone for a social movement that extends beyond Arizona. The film aired on PBS and is shown on college campuses around the country, and students and teachers who appear in the film travel to talk to groups as well. The social media activity and mainstream press coverage of the film has brought the ethnic studies debate out of the shadows of the overall immigration debate and reframed it for a wider audience. While the movement has not yet been successful in reinstating ethnic studies at TUSD or overturning the law, the public discourse is changing.

Ironically, despite the shift in public discourse, the opposition continues to try to use their rhetorical strategy of repeating things even if not true. When a third party audit of the MAS program in 2011 found that the program was clearly *not* in violation of the existing law,
Superintendent John Huppenthal literally held the report up at a press conference and said that the report *proved* that MAS was *unlawful*. Obviously he hoped that the rhetorical devices that worked a few years ago will continue to work, but unfortunately the overall rhetorical situation has changed, and he will have to adapt his strategy if he wants his arguments to be heard.

**Discussion/Conclusion**

Cognitive and cultural frames work both for us and against us. Their obvious developmental function is to organize inputs to the human brain in a meaningful way so that people can operate in a very complex, socially interactive world. However, researchers have also discovered the drawbacks and limitations of frames in the context of learning new information, meeting people with diverse backgrounds, making decisions in uncertain situations, and attempting to solve problems that require other people’s consent or participation. One foundational problem is that frames are rooted in language, and language is a symbolic system one step removed from reality. Language is both socially constructed and individually performed, giving language, and its associated concept “culture,” an ongoing fluidity that makes many people uncomfortable. People like certainty. People like straight answers. People want to know that what they perceive as “reality” is actually reality. Unfortunately, when discussing frames, none of these things is possible.

What is possible in a study of frames is an understanding of how people think, and thus, better ways to persuasively communicate with people. We can glean from the experts what works and what does not when trying to convince people to think or act a certain way. While this communication can be quite challenging when directed at one person or a small heterogeneous group, the challenge increases exponentially as the size and diversity of the
audience grows. Attempting to persuasively communicate through mass media requires even more thoughtfulness, insight, and rhetorical technique than individual face-to-face communications.

In addition to the problems associated with conflicting frames, communications in a large open society are further complicated by social forces influenced by power—economic, political, social, or situational. While traditional Marxism attributes all power differentials to economic forces, modern Marxists like Raymond Williams and Antonio Gramsci, who coined the term hegemony, understand that other structures within society can promulgate and maintain power. Gramsci recognized that the mass media was integral to the dominant classes maintaining their power over the other classes (Lull 49). However, the action of hegemony is not overt and obvious. In *Media, Communication, Culture: A Global Approach*, James Lull writes:

Hegemony works on a grand scale, but in a subtle way. It is not a *direct* stimulation of thought or action. According to Stuart Hall, hegemony is a “framing [of] all competing definitions of reality within [the dominant class’s] range, bringing all alternatives within their horizons of thought. [The dominant class] sets the limits—mental and structural—within which subordinate classes ‘live’ and make sense of their subordination in such a way as to sustain the dominance of those ruling over them.” (50)

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12 While this paper deals primarily with mass media, an area worthy of further study is social media. Right now, it is unclear what the overarching impact these new media will have on the power of hegemony. On one hand, social media democratizes news by providing nearly anyone access to an audience. As the mainstream media increasingly covers social media, pictures that are “tweeted,” videos uploaded to YouTube, and campaigns held on Facebook are garnering attention unthinkable even ten years ago. On the other hand, the internet allows people to search and filter information so that they only have to read and view items that support what they already believe. This self-selection and isolation actually stifles discourse and the free flow of information, creating deeply entrenched differences between groups. If one of these effects is stronger than the other or they counteract each other, it is too soon to tell.
While Williams and Gramsci may deviate from original Marxism in some aspects, they do agree that where there is oppression, resistance will follow. Lull writes, “Social consent is a necessary part of the process. Consent is a far more effective long-term means of social control than is coercion or force. For hegemony to work, people must believe in their system of governance and in their dominant culture” (51). Facilitating resistance against hegemony is where the true struggle is fought. Language and rhetoric are the weapons on this mass media battleground. But like history has taught, if a smaller fighting force is taking on a larger, better equipped army, the smaller group must approach the battle in strategic ways different from the larger army’s tactics.

Learning about the primacy of narrative, identification, and images from both the social scientists and the literary critics should provide a bit of a road map for non-dominant groups as they plan their communications. In “Discursive Strategies for Social Change: An Alternative Rhetoric of Argument,” Julia Allen and Lester Faigley write, “Over many centuries political resistance has been shaped and inspired by narratives. As far back as we have records of direct observation of popular culture, we find people telling stories and singing songs about their own lives that challenge the representations of their lives in dominant discourses” (166). Non-dominant groups must resist the urge to try to persuade people to see their side of the argument using only rational means—statistics, logic, or proof—or moral justification. None of these types of argument is as powerful as narrative. According to Allen and Faigley, grand narratives, like the dominant American narratives mentioned in the introduction, can produce negative effects if the narratives do not reflect reality or create stereotypes and discord among groups. However, small narratives that are “local and particular” to individuals or groups can counteract the “mythic qualities” of grand narratives (167). Allen and Faigley write, “Little narratives have been a primary means of raising issues of human rights and countering political wrongs” (167).
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