Framing Studies and Global Interdependence

An Introduction to the Research

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Earlier research conducted for the Global Interdependence Initiative focused on public opinion — what people think (Bostrom) and why they think as they do (Aubrun and Grady). This work complemented presentations to the Working Group by Steve Kull and Celinda Lake, who asserted that Americans were more supportive of GII goals than has been widely recognized (Kull) and that the public needs a compelling reason to get involved in these issues, possibly through ties to domestic issues already high on their agenda (Lake).

Bostrom’s summary of public opinion corroborated these observations in many respects, identifying as well problems in survey research methodology that tend to obscure Americans’ interest in and concern for global issues, and recommending some issues (e.g., infectious disease) that might build the “bridge” from foreign to domestic concerns that Lake had suggested. Aubrun and Grady’s interviews with ordinary Americans exposed the weak conceptual frames that Americans bring to the discussion of events in other countries. When Americans think of other countries, they think of them as people, and when they consider the relationships between people, they tend to think in terms of family hierarchies, not neighbor interdependencies. This frame leaves Americans especially vulnerable to what Lakoff has characterized as “strict father” politics in which authority, strength and discipline prove the core values of policy-making.

This new round of research begins to explore the differences between the public’s views and those of elites, especially the press and policy-makers. Axel Aubrun and Joseph Grady use textual analysis of mainstream print media to analyze the dominant frames that the news brings into public discourse on global issues, as well as those reflected by newsmakers within these articles. They compare these, point by point, to the models exposed in their earlier interviews with the public. George Lakoff explains the principles of metaphorical reasoning, examines its application to international issues with reference to neorealist and neoliberal theory, and uses two case studies – the Persian Gulf and Kosovo – to demonstrate why we need to reframe global issues. Susan Moeller takes us on a behind-the-scenes tour of editorial decision-making, documenting the frames that drive reporters and editors to cover the world in the way they do. Finally, my own paper reviews the last decade of work on media and foreign policy in an effort to root the GII research in the observations of scholars who have tilled this same vineyard.

What we learn from the Aubrun and Grady paper is that print media provide “a perspective on international relations that is closer to the expert models held by foreign policy practitioners than to the common understandings (or folk models) held by average Americans.” So, ironically, when policy-makers look to the press to reflect public opinion, they see a mirror of their own views. Aubrun and Grady then detail the numerous ways in which expert and public models differ. Notably, “experts pay more attention to foreign governments, while the public pays more
attention to foreign populations…. The public is more concerned with social and moral values, [while] experts are much more concerned with security and national interest...and expert frames are much more politically polarized than public frames.”

Aubrun and Grady also identify the points of commonality between the two groups, calling this the “American view.” This perspective includes: “cooperation is not a priority; the U.S. does the heavy lifting; the U.S. knows best; and Americans are good.” One of the most provocative of their findings is the authors’ contention that “public understandings are not closely based on media representations, even though those representations are a major source of information for the public.” Aubrun and Grady speculate that the very nature of the media frames – episodic, highly vivid, human interest cases – have the unanticipated consequence of “shielding” the public from the expert frame.

George Lakoff shows us how and why metaphorical thought guides our reasoning about foreign policy. Expanding upon the talk he gave at the Wye meeting this past fall, Lakoff delineates the “nation as family” construct and the “strict father” values that characterize one type of thinking. Moral authority, self-interest, the proper role of government, the view of the environment as a resource to be exploited for profit, etc. — all derive from this cognitive framework. Lakoff demonstrates that, “if states are persons, rationally pursuing their self-interest, namely military strength and economic health,” then the issues with which the GII concerns itself – environmental concerns, human rights, children’s health, humane labor practices, etc. – are irrelevant to a discussion in which power and money are the only goals of the game. Whether we view the world through the lens of the old neorealist policy or the new neoliberal one, we cannot get our issues into the debate. “The view of States as Firms in economic competition has no place for educating women in third-world countries, or preserving bioregionalism, or protecting the rights of indigenous peoples. When the market is seen as a force of nature, real nature is at best hidden and at worst destroyed as if it were a resource to be used or a product to be sold.”

Lakoff works us systematically through the metaphor domains – commerce, balance of power, bipolarity, national interest – and explores what values are emphasized and what is hidden when they map on to the target, foreign policy. He concludes that the dominant systems of metaphors will have to be changed, and goes so far as to suggest the direction we must pursue — one that fits in with new trends in international relations theory already recognized to some extent in the present administration. A new set of social norms, delineating what good countries do, must be invented — an extension of Lakoff’s nurturant parent to nurturant country. “There is a serious job of reframing to be undertaken before any new model can stand a chance of dethroning the old models that continue to constrain our imaginations and direct our policies,” he concludes. “Without such attention to the frames we bring to the job, we are likely merely to substitute new monsters for old.”

While Lakoff’s paper may seem challenging at first read, it is useful for the GII Working Group to recognize the systematicity we must bring to any analysis of
framing. Foreign policy is not an issue-by-issue matter. Laundry lists of current concerns do not get at the general underlying frames and conceptual metaphors that guide an overall vision of the world. Far from a simple creative spark in the mind of a Madison Avenue ad director, reframing requires a deep understanding of how language works, how it drives reasoning, how it incorporates some values at the expense of others, and how unconscious we all are in incorporating these frames into our ways of viewing the world. Practical change, Lakoff asserts, requires noticing general frames already present that can be worked with to address GII concerns.

Susan Moeller’s paper offers us rare insight into the conventions of journalism and how they affect the framing of foreign policy issues. Interestingly, in light of what we know about media effects, Moeller concludes that the “template for reporting” all crises – earthquakes, famines and insurrections – is similar. Following from her popular book, *Compassion Fatigue*, Moeller argues that the compassion fatigue frame “establishes a hierarchy of events and issues that is fairly reliably adhered to...a narrative of events that presumes to be THE narrative.” Compassion fatigue, then, involves a speculation on the part of journalists about what interests the public and what will overcome the foreignness of foreign affairs reporting. Indeed, one way to read Moeller’s article is as a guide to how the press thinks about the public on these issues. In order to pierce through the media clutter and deliver the crisis that warrants distracting Americans from concerns at home, media must present a simple and recognizable chronology of events, sensationalized and exaggerated language, metaphors that resonate with Americans (note the similarity between Moeller’s description and what Lakoff outlines as “the fairy tale war”), and an American connection.

Moeller updated her book with three weeks of media sampling and specific analyses of the presentations of victimized children and of human rights in stories of international affairs. She finds that children appear in international reporting as “angels, as martyrs, as victims to be rescued, as torchbearers, as literary crutches,” not unlike the ways they are used in domestic coverage. Little connection was found between the children often pictured to illustrate stories and the content of the news story.

Human rights issues were often packaged in terms of “universal justice...war for moral principles...war crimes...moral responsibility...and criminal guilt (or) legal evidence.” Moeller draws our attention to the way in which the dominant frames of international reporting creep into the script on these issues as well. Human rights can be made to satisfy the human-interest function or to “prove the existence of evil,” while the brutality of the crimes provides the necessary sensationalism to justify coverage.

While Moeller illuminates the bad habits of media that impede greater public understanding of global interdependence, she also points out the bad habits of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which frequently play into the dominant media frames in order to enhance their stature or revenue-base domestically. And while she is dubious that media can be reformed, she is sanguine about the opportunities NGOs have to work within the conventions to
get better stories. By understanding the way media work, and their limitations, Moeller asserts, NGOs can intervene and direct coverage.

Where have we come from and where are we going? My own paper views these new findings against the broader backdrop of an evolving literature, and asks what can be learned from past scholarship on the relationship of media to international issues. While the perspective of strategic frame analysis that the research team brings to this discussion is a fresh one, it can be seen to respond directly to past criticisms of, and suggestions from, scholars and practitioners who have worked this area. Long before the end of the Cold War, foreign policy scholars and analysts recognized the need for a “replacement metaphor” to guide the understanding and actions of policy-makers. Others probed the inherent tension between diplomacy, viewed as a secret transaction between elites, and media, viewed as the foundation for democratic discourse and debate. Still others bemoaned the public’s lack of understanding of geography, history and foreign affairs, concluding that little communication was possible between governing elites and the governed on this topic.

My paper works through five major themes that occur in this literature, identifying points of common interest with the Global Interdependence Initiative, and concluding with a short annotated bibliography. It is meant to provide a “quick study” for GII working group members and their staffs, offering background on the kind of inquiry in which we are presently engaged.

It is on the basis of this historical and analytical context that I offer the following observations, which are mine alone. What can we learn from past efforts combined with our own new research, to help us understand what we are up against in attempting to evolve and shape a new foreign policy climate?

These papers now begin to map the problem in important ways. We might think of a kind of evolving problem statement that goes something like this: The public is positively inclined toward the kinds of foreign policy positions that the GII would put forward. However, Americans lack several important resources to make this predisposition manifest. First, they lack any vehicles for expressing public opinion sentiment to policy-makers; they do not “belong” to any group or lobby that solicits their views and is charged with translating these to media and policy-makers. Second, while they may hold a contradictory mental model to the dominant ones, it needs to be described, articulated, made conscious and given a language if people are to be able to reason and act upon it. For want of such a developed model, they are easily manipulated into tensions between foreign and domestic issues, and by arguments that stress a military model. Third, they lack any experiential reference or “checks” to mediate images and interpretations. Again, this leaves them vulnerable to the storytelling power of those who have this first-hand experience and plausible explanations. And, finally, the public often lacks a “reason to know” or “standing” on foreign policy issues. Policy-makers have been highly effective in emphasizing the complexity of these issues, the public’s lack of knowledge, and the importance of secrecy to security. These tensions between democracy and diplomacy can be easily manipulated to effectively shut the public out of any foreign policy issue.
By contrast, elites suffer from few of these barriers to discourse participation. They have the requisite educational credentials to allow them to access and interpret information from around the globe. They have powerful mental models of how the world works, even though those models may have to be readjusted periodically in light of dramatic worldwide political shifts. These mental models include both ways to tell the story (paradigms and practices of journalism) and ways to interpret events (political theory and diplomatic education). They have standing by definition, and they are accorded a kind of political proxy for reflecting public opinion, in the case of journalists, and for enacting public opinion, in the case of policy-makers. The system is a closed one, with little need for actual public consultation, since the public’s views can always be explained by the following: insufficient information or interest, no discernable pressure on policy-makers, or recourse to the media as its most available public expression.

The public’s inherent support for issues like development aid or peacekeeping is undermined by its inability to express and justify the mental model that gives rise to these views. Moreover, as media move in to fill the silence, media constructs become the proxy for public opinion. The media’s tendencies toward conflict frames, sensationalism and trivialization, vivid human interest reporting, psychological profiling, and episodic coverage fill the vacuum. While we have not yet demonstrated the specific effects of the kind of foreign policy news Americans see every night on their television screens (forthcoming papers from Gilliam, Iyengar and Lichter will address this), existing research suggests that this kind of coverage results in a sense of fatality, an interpretation of the world as a series of disconnected episodes, with little that can be done through policy to prevent their outbreak.

The implications of this work for the Global Interdependence Initiative become clearer as we move through this process of discovery. First, we must find new mental models that translate into causal narratives that allow the public to attach meaning to foreign events in ways that do not reduce to military intervention. These models must allow the public’s inherent support to find expression in arguments and reasoning that explain events in ways consistent with more progressive policies. That is the task that the FrameWorks Institute has undertaken in the first two years of directed research.

Second, and of equal importance, we must find vehicles or forums that allow these new narratives to connect to the public and to take root. It is highly unlikely, given all the economic constraints on commercial media, that this will happen through existing media without substantial opportunities for media education, training and fellowships for journalists — ideas that have been suggested again and again, and are referenced in the addendum to my paper. At the same time, however, the GII will need to get ready to inherit the research by creating powerful, sustained outreach vehicles (public discussions, organizational newsletters, membership briefings, websites and noncommercial media) that bypass traditional media. Without mobilization, these new narratives will be lost in the information clutter of elections, interest groups and well-financed lobbies, all directing the attention of the public to other issues. Those GII members that
are constituency-based will need to consider carefully how to use their public access to these ends.

Third, once the public has a conscious general model that characterizes its instincts and language to describe that model, it needs to find a way of expressing its voice on these issues to policy-makers. This is a major task of invention. At the heart of this problem is the tension between democracy and diplomacy, with the arena of foreign affairs reserved for elites. If the public continues to have no way to express its mandate or its outrage, rich public discussion may ensue as a result of GII efforts, but to no discernible policy outcome. While the research can help us to understand why policy-makers cannot “hear” the public on these issues, by identifying different frames evident in their discourse, it cannot build a platform for the public to voice its reframes. The very process of foreign policy-making will need to be opened up to public input. The structures for accomplishing this task will need to be invented – a tall order, but one that is ripe for tackling by GII members.

Please take the time to read the enclosed papers carefully. While they are intellectually challenging, and often contest our own deeply ingrained frames of meaning, they are critical to achieving the goals of the Global Interdependence Initiative. As always, the research team invites your inquiry and comment.

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January 2000