

# COMMUNICATION & SOCIETY

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**Submitted**

April 28th, 2019

**Approved**

June 25th, 2019

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Communication & Society

ISSN 0214-0039

E ISSN 2386-7876

doi: 10.15581/003.32.4.361-378

[www.communication-society.com](http://www.communication-society.com)

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2019 – Vol. 32(4)

pp. 361-378

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**How to cite this article:**

Carragee, K. M. (2019).

Communication, Activism and the News Media: An Agenda for Future Research. *Communication & Society*, 32(4), 361-378.

## Communication, Activism and the News Media: An Agenda for Future Research

### Abstract

**This study examines two central questions focusing on the news media and political change: How do we best understand the relationship between the news media and political change? How do we best understand the interaction between the news media and social movements? The analysis initially relates these two questions to three broad issues, exploring the importance of digital activism, stressing the need to examine issues related to power in order to fully grapple with these questions, and highlighting the ahistorical nature of research on digital activism and on disinformation campaigns. Following this discussion, the study defines a detailed agenda for future framing research, pointing to significant shortcomings in this perspective. These limitations include conceptual difficulties in the definition of frames, and the failure of many studies to analyze frame sponsorship and the centrality of resources in the ability to sponsor frames. Subsequently, this discussion focuses on the lack of attention to framing processes in most of**

**the research literature, and the failure to consider emotions as an influence on framing. This study concludes by examining how engaged or activist research can address shortcomings in framing research. By revitalizing framing research, we can better understand the complex relationship between the news media and political change and between the news media and social movements.**

### Keywords

**Frames, framing, social movements, news media, political change.**

### 1. Introduction

This analysis begins by examining two central questions focusing on the news media and political change. I subsequently discuss three broad issues relating to these questions. Following this introduction, I define a detailed agenda for future framing research, examining traditional and digital forms of activism.

Consistent with past research exploring journalism's political role, this analysis explores two significant questions. How do we best understand the relationship between the news media and political change? How do we best understand the interaction between the news media and social movements? These questions are linked given that social movements frequently play a central role in sparking change. For example, American history reveals the significant influence of multiple movements, including the Progressive movement of the early twentieth century, the African-American civil rights movement, and the feminist movement.

Grappling with these questions has become more complex and more urgent in our current environment given three concurrent developments. First, threats to democratic institutions and practices have increased over the last decade (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018; Foa & Mounk, 2016; Snyder, 2018). Second, contemporary journalism confronts a crisis in many countries, with a sharp reduction in advertising revenue to support legacy news media, the closing of newspapers, and a significant decline in the number of journalists employed by news organizations. Public confidence in the news media has eroded in many nations (McChesney & Nichols, 2010; McChesney & Pickard, 2011). Third, we confront a political landscape that has been transformed by the increasing importance of digital activism as a means to mobilize support and to secure change. Our exploration of these questions needs to consider these contexts.

We also need to consider the overwhelming evidence, generated by decades of research, that traditional journalism frequently has supported the political status quo, given its overreliance on elite government and corporate sources and given the political views of its corporate owners. In turn, mainstream news organizations often delegitimize progressive social movements (Carragee, 1991; Gitlin, 1980; Gottlieb, 2015).

A consideration of this evidence, however, does not support the strong hegemony model, a model that simplifies the relationship between the news media and political change (Barker-Plummer, 1996; Carragee & Roefs, 2004). Despite the significant shortcomings of corporate news media, considerable research evidence also reveals that progressive movements –using creative organizing and media strategies– have influenced reportage as a means to mobilize support and produce change, with environmental movements in multiple nations and the African-American civil rights movement in the United States providing striking examples of this process. Similarly, more recent movements, including the #Me Too movement, the Occupy movement, and the Indignados movement in Spain, have demonstrated a similar capacity. Therefore, the relationships between the news media, political change and social movements can best be described as complex and contingent.

My subsequent discussion relates these two questions to three broad issues. I first explore the importance of digital activism. I, then, stress the need to examine issues related to power in order to fully grapple with these questions. Finally, I highlight the ahistorical nature of research on digital activism and on disinformation campaigns. Given space constraints, I sketch these concerns, with most of my analysis focusing on how to revitalize framing scholarship in an effort to address these questions.

### 1.1. *Digital Activism Matters*

Digital activism matters as a form of activism that has consequences and as a form of activism that has the capacity to restructure the relationship between the news media and political change. Recent movements fuelled by digital activism, including the Occupy movement, Black Lives Matter and the #Me Too movement, have influenced public perceptions of issue salience and, to a degree, have produced institutional reforms. Black Lives Matter, for example, has helped to end stop and frisk police tactics in multiple American cities. This movement also has advanced a critique of a criminal justice system characterized by the mass incarceration of minorities, contributing to reforms in many states and cities defining alternatives to imprisonment.

These movement through their use of social media have influenced news media coverage, blurring clear-cut distinctions between digital activism and mainstream journalism. Binaries between forms of digital activism and traditional activism are also problematic. For example, the Occupy and the Indignados movements combined an emphasis on digital activism with the occupation of physical spaces, as did Egyptian activists who toppled the Mubarak regime. Careful analyses of contemporary movements reveal how these movements employ multiple forms of mediated communication, while also depending on traditional forms of organizing

that are dependent on face-to-face interaction (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Rucht, 2013; Ryan, Jeffreys, Elowitz & Ryczek, 2013; Tufekci, 2017). Therefore, contemporary movements frequently combine online and offline forms of activism.

This discussion reveals the need to abandon reductionistic claims dismissing digital activism as slacktivism with few political consequences. Digital activism has enabled social movements to mobilize very rapidly, scaling up their level of support in ways that were not possible prior to the emergence of digital media. Simultaneously, digital activism enables contemporary social movements to by-pass corporate or state controlled news media that are frequently antagonistic to their goals. Finally, skilled and creative use of social media provide movements with additional communicative capacity, increasing their ability to attract and influence mainstream news coverage (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Pickard & Yang, 2017; Tufekci, 2017).

### **1.2. Power Matters**

Power matters in traditional forms of activism and in the digital realm. I recognize that this is a commonplace observation, but it remains remarkable how often research ignores power inequalities and how they shape political conflicts, including the efforts of progressive movements to challenge elites. Framing research frequently neglects issues related to power, a shortcoming discussed in depth later in this analysis.

Digital networks represent important resources for progressive activists, but they also constitute a resource for elite actors, government institutions and corporations, with far more resources. The power imbalances that shape the interactions between traditional social movements and elite groups also exist in the digital realm. Research frequently has documented that a limited number of on-line spaces attract large audiences, while other digital forums attract micro-publics (Cammaerts, Mattoni & McCurdy, 2013). While digital networks enable traditionally marginalized groups to circulate their agendas, this takes place in a highly fragmented information environment, making it difficult for these groups to reach broader publics who lack knowledge of these groups and their issues.

I agree with Lance Bennett's observation (2017) that "the ubiquity and networking capacity of digital media have, in many ways, changed the political game" (p. xiv). However, changes in the political game exist not only for progressive activists, but also for elites. We need to remain sensitive to how power imbalances continue to structure contemporary political environments, including the digital arena.

### **1.3. The Ahistorical Nature of Research on Digital Activism and Contemporary Disinformation Campaigns**

Scholars repeatedly have criticized media research for its failure to place contemporary issues within broader historical contexts (Carey, 2009; Hardt, 2004; Scalmer, 2013). Two contemporary examples illustrate this tendency.

First, problematic claims about the democratic and emancipatory character of digital media reflect historical patterns relating to the introduction of past communication technologies. Some scholars and intellectuals have praised each successive communication technology for its alleged capacity to create more democratic societies, and to develop more engaged and better-informed citizens. In the twentieth century, some intellectuals viewed film, radio and television as a means to create a more democratic and robust public sphere. These hopes, however, were never fully realized, given the increasingly commercialized nature of these media over time, the rise of powerful media conglomerates fully aligned with corporate interests, and given the use of these new technologies for anti-democratic purposes, for example, the skilled use of radio and film to distribute propaganda in Nazi Germany.

Within the present context, digital media represent a resource for progressive activists and for creating more democratic societies. However, the use of digital media in this way takes place in an on-line environment dominated by a few corporate actors, including Facebook and Google. While the internet enables progressive activists to advance their causes, it also provides this opportunity for elites. Moreover, digital media, like older media technologies, have become dominated by uses associated with entertainment, advertising, and consumerism (McChesney, 2013; Taylor, 2014). We, therefore, need to embed our understanding of the political consequences of digital activism within the political economy of digital media and within historical contexts. Kaun and Uldam (2018) lament the failure to “historicize the role of digital media for political activism” (p. 2100). An historical and contextual approach to digital activism corresponds with Raymond Williams’s observation (1974) that media technologies are connected to broader political and social structures rather than being isolated from them.

Second, organized disinformation campaigns have a long and troubling history. The enduring influence of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, initially circulated in 1903 by the Czarist secret police in Russia, demonized Jews and has produced numerous waves of anti-Semitism and violent pogroms. In the 1930s, the Spanish Right justified its military rising against the Republic as a crusade against communists, socialists, anarchists and Jews. Within this context, Spain needed to be “purified,” and this purification involved violent repression. Subsequently, the long Franco dictatorship continued the division of Spain into the victorious and vanquished (Preston, 2006). These and countless other examples illustrate a maxim that long pre-dates the digital era: “A lie travels around the globe while truth is putting on its shoes.”

I am not advocating for intellectual complacency as a response to the challenge of current well-organized disinformation campaigns. However, we should place these campaigns in broader historical contexts, deriving lessons from past experiences concerning how best to respond to these initiatives.

Declining public confidence in democracy itself provides fertile ground for current disinformation campaigns. In the United States, 46 percent of respondents in a 2016 survey indicated that they either “never had” or had “lost faith” in American democracy. Researchers have obtained similar results in European nations (Foa & Mounk, 2016). Effectively confronting contemporary disinformation campaigns demands a revitalization of democratic institutions and the democratic public sphere (Benkler *et al.*, 2018; Bennett & Livingston, 2016).

## 2. Revitalizing Framing Research

Since the 1980s, framing research has expanded rapidly. In its full scope, it explores the construction of frames by political actors, frame sponsorship, how journalists produce frames, how news stories articulate frames, how audience members interpret frames, and the influence of frames. The breadth of this scholarship has attracted the attention of media scholars, political scientists and sociologists. Researchers have provided useful overviews of the framing tradition (Borah, 2011; D’Angelo, 2002, 2012; Pan & Kosicki, 1993).

Although framing research has expanded significantly over time, researchers have advanced substantive criticisms of this perspective, focusing on conceptual problems in defining frames, the fractured character of framing scholarship, the failure to address issues related to power, and difficulties distinguishing framing influences from priming and agenda-setting effects (Cacciatore, Scheufele & Iyengar, 2016; Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Entman, 1993; Vliegehart & Van Zoonen, 2011).

Recommendations by Krippendorff (2017) and Cacciatore *et al.* (2016) to abandon framing as a research approach or to significantly narrow its focus neglect the tradition’s valuable contributions and represent an overreaction to the limitations of some framing perspectives.

Framing scholarship has been and will remain fractured given the commitments of researchers to different paradigms –post-positivist, interpretive and critical– that inform their work (D’Angelo, 2002). Despite its fractured character, we should address weaknesses within and across these different approaches.

While specific descriptions of frames vary widely, substantive definitions stress how frames organize news stories and other discourses through their patterns of selection, emphasis, interpretation, and exclusion. In an influential definition, Entman (1993) contended that “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way to as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (p. 5). Similarly, Reese (2001) described frames as “organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world” (p. 11).

Meaningful examinations of journalistic framing of issues highlight that this process evolves in complex political contexts. Frames sponsored by multiple actors, including politicians, corporations, and social movements, influence how journalists define events and issues. News stories often become a forum for framing contests in which multiple actors compete by sponsoring their preferred definitions. Carragee and Roefs (2004) stressed that “a frames ability to dominate news discourses depends on complex factors, including its sponsor’s economic and cultural resources, its sponsor’s knowledge of journalistic practices, these practices themselves, and a frames resonance with broader political values” (p. 216). Framing contests routinely favor elites, given traditional journalistic practices and the significance of resources in the effective sponsorship of frames (Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Porto, 2007; Tuchman, 1978; Vliegthart & Van Zoonen, 2011).

Despite the quality of considerable framing scholarship, significant problems plague this perspective. I begin discussing these problems with an examination of conceptual difficulties in the definition of frames. I, then, examine the failure of many studies to analyze frame sponsorship and the centrality of resources in the ability to sponsor frames, shortcomings that contribute to framing scholarship’s inattention to how power inequalities inform framing contests. Subsequently, I focus on the lack of attention to framing processes in most of the research literature, and the failure to consider emotions as an influence on framing. I conclude this part of the analysis by examining how engaged or activist framing research can address shortcomings in framing research.

### **2.1. Conceptual Difficulties in the Definition of Frames**

Multiple conceptual problems exist in defining frames. Reviews of the framing literature regularly highlight the contradictory and imprecise ways many studies have defined frames (Borah, 2011; Carragee, 2019; Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Vliegthart & Van Zoonen, 2011). Some studies reduce frames to broad themes or story topics (Gonzalez-Estaban, Lopez-Garcia, Llorca-Abad & Lopez-Rico, 2015; Guo, Holton & Jeong, 2012; Hipsher, 2007), while others define frames as issue positions (Copeland, Hasell & Bimber, 2016; McCombs, Llamas, Lopez-Escobar & Rey, 1997). For example, Gottlieb (2015) identified sweeping topics and themes as frames, including economic and conflict frames, in his study of *The New York Times*’s coverage of Occupy Wall Street. Reducing frames to expansive themes or story topics fails to define how frame sponsors and journalists construct the meaning of specific issues related to these broad concerns.

Defining frames as issue positions ignores how a single frame can apply to several issues. Political elites and the American news media, for example, applied the Cold War frame to multiple U.S. military interventions (Hallin, 1987); currently, the “war on terror” frame plays a major role in shaping how U.S. political elites and mainstream journalists interpret world events (Reese, 2007). In addition, a single-issue position can be defined in different ways by

different frames. For instance, a pacifist frame can inform opposition to U.S. military action in Afghanistan, but a pragmatic anti-war frame can define the same issue position but does so by highlighting the excessive cost of this intervention in lives, resources and money (Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989).

While framing research will continue to be shaped by the commitment of researchers to post-positivist, interpretive or critical approaches to social science, there remains a compelling need in all of these framing perspectives to address conceptual problems in defining frames. At the very least, researchers should abandon broad definitions of frames as themes or story topics. Similarly, research should avoid definitions that reduce frames to issue positions.

## **2.2. *The Neglect of Frame Sponsorship and Power***

Scholars often explore the multiple, at times conflicting, frames in news stories, but frequently fail to trace these frames back to specific sponsors or to examine the economic and cultural resources available to sponsors to distribute and highlight their preferred frames. Some studies neglect the process of frame sponsorship entirely, examining frames articulated in news discourses and, at times, on their influence (Kim & Telleen, 2017; Rodriguez Perez, 2017; Sotirovic, 2000). Other studies provide limited analyses of frame sponsorship, failing to evaluate the sponsor's economic and cultural resources and how these resources influence framing contests (Deprez & Raeymaeckers, 2010; Kroon, Kluknavska, Vliegthart & Boomgarden, 2016; Nelson, Clawson & Oxley, 1997). These shortcomings neglect that framing contests in news and other discourses are shaped by power inequities. The resources available to sponsors significantly influence the ability of a specific frame to dominate a particular discourse even when alternative frames are present. While digital media provide an important resource for social movements to advance their frames, power inequalities are present in this arena as well, shaping this discursive field.

Critics fault many framing studies for their recurring inattention to how power shapes the outcomes of framing contests (Carragee, 2019; Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Vliegthart & Van Zoonen, 2011). Therefore, a meaningful approach to framing research needs to be informed by an examination of the resources available to specific sponsors.

Researchers also have criticized framing research for its failure to analyze the *interaction* between social movements and the news media (Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Tromble & Meffert, 2016). Research on news media coverage of social movements and scholarship on the influence of journalistic frames on audiences contribute to this neglect because of their failure to explore frame production and frame sponsorship. In calling for a dialogic approach to the relationship between the news media and movements, Barker-Plummer (2010) stressed that far more research has focused on how the news media frame or define social movements than on the interaction between news organizations and social movements, an interaction much shaped by movement efforts to influence news coverage (examples of research analyzing journalistic representations of movements include Ashley & Olson, 1998; Gottlieb, 2015; Weaver & Scacco, 2013; Xu, 2013).

The expanding research literature on framing effects has defined frames primarily as content features of news stories in order to study their influence (Gross & Brewer, 2007; Iorio & Huxman, 1996; Schuck & De Vreese, 2006). This represents a considerable narrowing of framing scholarship because it neglects frame sponsorship and why certain frames dominate news texts and others do not (Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Vliegthart & Van Zoonen, 2011). While Cacciaotore *et al.* (2016) properly highlight shortcomings in framing research linked to the failure to distinguish framing effects from priming and agenda-setting influences, their proposal to focus framing research exclusively on particular types of media effects problematically reduces this research tradition's scope. Paradoxically, in an earlier discussion

of framing research, Scheufele (1999) correctly cautioned against an approach that fails to explore frame construction.

### **2.3. *The Lack of Focus on Framing Processes***

The inattention to frame sponsorship directly corresponds to an enduring limitation in framing scholarship: its failure to examine framing as a process linked to the social construction of meaning. A recurring critique of framing research has stressed that far more scholarship has focused on frames embedded in texts rather than on framing processes central to the construction of these frames (Carragee, 2019; Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Benford, 1997; Ryan, 2005; Snow & Benford, 1992). In a review of framing studies published in communication journals from 1997–2007, Borah (2011) discovered that only 2.3% of these articles examined frame construction.

Even studies that have examined frame sponsorship overwhelmingly have done so by analyzing frames within texts produced by social actors (Coe, 2015; Hipsher, 2007). Barnett (2005) provides a representative illustration of this approach in her analysis of the frames embedded in the National Organization for Women’s news releases from 1995 to 2003. While these studies have merit, especially when they connect frame sponsorship to considerations of power, they focus attention on the *results of framing processes* –frames– rather than on the processes themselves. These studies “do not substitute for explorations of framing processes as conducted by collective actors” (Ryan, 2005, p. 118). Framing research, therefore, has focused overwhelmingly on frames in discourses and on their influence rather than on framing as a process linked to meaning construction.

This discussion highlights the need for research that combines an analysis of frames expressed in texts with an examination of the framing processes employed by collective actors who produce these frames. This research needs to avoid reifying social movements. Benford (1997) reminds us that “social movements do not frame issues; their activists or other participants do the framing” (p. 418). Scholarship on framing needs to focus on human agency (Carragee, 2005, 2018; Polletta & Amenta, 2001; Ryan & Jeffreys, 2012). This research demands a multi-methodological approach, integrating textual or content analysis with participant observation examining meaning construction through framing and/or detailed interviews with frame sponsors, including movement activists. These methods should be applied to framing processes in offline and online settings, examining the similarities and differences in frame construction in these contexts. Unfortunately, these studies are rare. Studies that examine framing as a social process linked to meaning production provide valuable insights (Carragee, 2005, 2018; Canella, 2016; Schwirian, Curry & Woldoff, 2001).

A study by Benford and a research program by Ryan provide compelling examples of the benefits derived from close examinations of frame construction. Relying on participant observation, detailed interviews with key activists and an analysis of movement produced documents, Benford (1993) provides a detailed analysis of framing disputes within the nuclear disarmament movement, highlighting conflicts between moderate and radical wings of this movement in their efforts to attract news coverage, influence public opinion, and shape public policy. Ryan, as a scholar-activist, worked for ten years with the Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence (RICADV), documenting how its activists engaged in framing processes that influenced public policy and reporting on domestic violence. Her studies provide important insights into multiple issues, including the need for collective actors to build their communication infrastructure over time, the nature of framing as a dialogic process, and how collective actors forge connections between framing and broader movement strategies (Ryan, 2005; Ryan *et al.*, 2010; Ryan & Jeffreys, 2012, 2019). Benford’s study and Ryan’s engaged research provide effective templates for future studies on framing as a social process.

While researchers routinely refer to framing research and framing theory, a review of this tradition reveals an overwhelming focus on frames and their influence and a concurrent neglect of framing as a social process. Scholarship needs to address this striking imbalance.

#### ***2.4. The Inattention to the Role of Emotions in Influencing Framing Processes***

Framing research in particular and social movement scholarship in general also has neglected the role of emotions in sparking protest and in shaping framing processes. Framing scholarship has an ideational and cognitive emphasis, eschewing a consideration of emotion. Frames, in this view, are a product of the rational actions, for example, of movement activists, who are influenced by strategic and tactical considerations (Benford, 1997; Goodwin, Jasper & Polletta, 2001; Jasper, 1997, 2011; Polletta & Amenta, 2001). Ferree and Merrill (2000) point out that “[a]t its core, the problem that framing language presents is that it ‘cools’ the analysis of movement thinking by separating it from the deeply felt passions and value commitments that motivate action” (p. 457). Research examining frames embedded in texts contributes to this inattention because it inherently is unable to examine the emotional components involved in frame construction.

A more robust conception of framing needs to consider the cognitive and emotional nature of this form of signification. This conception should abandon the traditional binary between rationality and emotion, taking a view of social action that foregrounds both cognition and passion (Benford, 1997; Calhoun, 2001). Jasper (2011) reminds us that “feeling and thinking are parallel, interacting processes of evaluating and interacting with our worlds...” (p. 286). Researchers should account for the cognitive and emotional character of framing as a process linked meaning construction.

#### ***2.5. The Need for More Research on Frames and Framing Related to Digital Activism***

Despite a rapidly changing information environment, framing research often remains focused on legacy news media reporting on social movements (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). While this research continues to have merit, more scholarship needs to be devoted to frames and framing related to digital activism.

The further extension of framing research to the digital arena needs to examine multiple significant issues. Researchers should devote attention to frames advanced by digital disinformation campaigns sponsored by state or non-state actors (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018; Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Similarly, increased scholarship needs to focus on frame sponsorship by movements engaging in digital activism; within this context, research should explore framing as a social process within the digital realm, while simultaneously considering digitally enabled frame construction within the context of the strategic and tactical decision-making of movement activists. To address a current imbalance in scholarship, increased attention should be given to the framing practices of right-wing parties and movements.

In their examinations of frame sponsorship and frames produced through digital activism, researchers should analyze the similarities and differences in framing processes and frames between traditional forms of collective action and digital activism. Bennett and Seggerberg’s analysis (2013) of several movements represents a significant examination of this issue. Their distinction between personalized action frames produced through digital activism and collective action frames constructed by traditional movements enriches our understanding of contemporary activism.

Some research in this area overstates the consequences of digital activism, given its emphasis on networked individualism, an individualism that threatens the formation of collective identity and the ability of movements to sustain their struggles over time (Gerbaudo, 2017; Tufekci, 2017). Similarly, some scholarship on digital activism suffers from an ahistorical perspective. Della Porta (2005), for example, has claimed that digital networks spark the formation of multiple belongings and flexible identities. The existence of multiple



belongings and flexible identities among movement activists, however, long pre-dates digital networks. Writing before the emergence of digital activism, Gamson and Meyer (1996) remind us that a single movement represents a “field of actors, not a unified entity” (p. 283), linking activists who hold different views that often evolve given relationships formed within a movement. Moreover, in the pre-digital age, activists frequently joined multiple movements, producing multiple identities and belongings. Take, for example, a leftist in the United States in the 1930s who joined the Socialist Party, served as a union organizer, contributed to the civil rights movement of African-Americans, and who, in 1936, volunteered for the Abraham Lincoln Brigade to serve the Spanish Republic in its struggle against fascism, despite knowing that the Brigade was dominated by the American Communist Party. This example and many others demonstrate the heterogeneity of political commitments and social movements over time, revealing that flexible identities and multiple belongings have long existed among movement activists.

## 2.6. *Revitalizing the Framing Perspective Through Engaged Research*

A focus on engaged or activist scholarship also can contribute to the revitalization of the framing perspective. The contributions of the Media Research and Action Project (MRAP) and scholarship associated with Communication Activism Research (CAR) provide templates for linking framing research with the efforts of progressive social movements. Forging a robust connection between framing and progressive activism would enhance the framing research tradition in two significant ways. First, it would connect this tradition with efforts to remedy the many pressing problems that confront contemporary societies. Second, by establishing partnerships between scholars and activists, it would address the limitations in the framing tradition previously discussed, particularly limitations related to framing as a social process and frame sponsorship.

MRAP bridges the longstanding gap between social movement research and social movement activism, forging partnerships with underresourced social movements. In this sense, it seeks to unite theory and practice, employing insights from social movement scholarship and framing research to aid these movements in securing reforms.

MRAP has made extensive contributions to social movement and framing research. This scholarship has explored diverse issues, including framing processes, frame sponsorship, collective action frames, and movement strategy and tactics (Carragee, 1999, 2018; Croteau, Hoynes & Ryan, 2005; Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards & Rucht, 2002; Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes & Sasson, 1992; Gamson & Meyer, 1996; Ryan, 1991, 2005).

At the same time, the group has assisted community groups and social movements in framing issues, overcoming barriers to news media access, and developing coordinated media and organizing strategies. Since its founding in 1986, MRAP has employed social movement theory and framing theory to guide more than 300 partnerships with community groups and social movement organizations (for discussions of MRAP’s history see Ryan, Carragee & Schwerner, 1998; Ryan, Carragee & Meinhofer 2001). Ryan has guided most of these collaborations (Ryan, 1991, 2005; Ryan *et al.*, 2010; Ryan & Jeffreys, 2012, 2019). Reflecting on MRAP’s history, Ryan (2005) stressed that the group over time became “more than an aggregate of individuals with shared interests; we became a small collective actor defining and implementing a mission and a social practice –thinking, listening, speaking, collaborating, and reflecting as a conscious change agent” (p. 120).

MRAP views the news media as a critical symbolic arena for the definition of issues and as a potential resource for community groups and movements. Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) argued that movement- news media interaction is best understood as a “struggle over framing” (p. 117). MRAP’s attention to framing contests emphasizes that elites frequently dominate this symbolic arena because of their considerable financial and cultural capital (Carragee & Roefs, 2004; Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes & Sasson, 1992; Ryan, 2005). In his

otherwise insightful analysis of the multiparadigmatic nature of framing research, D'Angelo (2002) downplays this emphasis in Gamson's research, improperly distancing his work and by extension MRAP's approach from critical perspectives on framing. Despite the importance of power in shaping framing contests, MRAP's collaborations with underresourced community groups have demonstrated that these collective actors can influence news coverage in significant ways and, in so doing, secure change. MRAP has "helped groups to select frames with broad cultural resonances, to sharpen their ability to express these claims in ways consistent with the demands of American journalism, and to contradict opposing frames" (Carragee, 1999, p. 111).

MRAP's partnerships with social movement organizations have stressed the need to develop collective action frames given their centrality in sparking and sustaining meaningful efforts for change. These frames "define people as potential agents of their own history" (Gamson & Meyer, 1996, p. 285). According to Gamson (1992), these frames have three dimensions: an injustice component (the identification of a harm produced by human action); an agency component (a belief that change is possible through collective action); and an identity component (the socially constructed definition of the collective actor and its adversary). Journalism's event orientation and emphasis on conflict frequently make it difficult for social movements to advance collective action frames through the news media. Nonetheless, social movement organizations, assisted by MRAP, have employed these types of frames to secure change on a variety of issues, including domestic violence, homelessness, and Boston's housing crisis (Carragee, 2005, 2018; Ryan, 2005; Ryan & Jeffreys, 2012, 2019). Despite MRAP's contributions to studying the production of collective action frames, framing scholarship as a whole has tended to analyze these frames as textual features, neglecting "collective action framing as a lived process" (Ryan, 2005, p. 130).

In assisting social movements in framing issues, MRAP embeds this effort in a broader approach. This perspective, linking framing with strategic decision-making and movement organizing, avoids a simplistic and reductionistic view that the effective framing of issues by underresourced groups can serve as "magic bullet" to promote change. In contrast, MRAP has underscored that "[t]here is no communication strategy without an organizing strategy" (Ryan, 2005, p. 121). As a consequence, MRAP seeks to increase the organizational and communication resources available to groups lacking power. These resources include, for instance, money, labor either in the form of paid staff or committed volunteers, and increased communication capacity in the form of access to technology and enhanced knowledge of how journalists gather the news and define newsworthiness. MRAP also highlights how grassroots groups can increase their power by building strategic alliances with like-minded social movements and with sympathetic public officials. Finally, the group's partnerships with activist groups stresses the need for these groups to analyze their political opportunities by carefully evaluating the distribution of power in the social environments in which they operate (Carragee, 2005, 2018; Ryan, 2005; Ryan & Jeffreys, 2012, 2019).

CAR involves communication scholars using their theories and knowledge to work with and for underresourced groups to intervene into unjust discourses and material conditions to promote change. Within CAR, scholars engage in activism, but also produce research to analyze their activist involvement with marginalized groups (Carragee & Frey, 2016; Frey & Carragee, 2007a, 2007b, 2012).

CAR's development in particular and the increasing interest in engaged scholarship in general reflects broad concerns related to the insularity of scholarship in the social sciences, an insularity that divorces research from contemporary problems. Critics of traditional social science research, including communication scholarship, have faulted this tradition for frequently serving elite interests and, in so doing, perpetuating significant injustices (Conquergood, 1995; Frey, Pearce, Pollock, Artz & Murphy, 1996; Giddens, 1982). Thus, considerable applied or engaged research in marketing, advertising, mediated

communication, organizational communication, and public relations has reinforced powerful interests. Carragee and Frey (2016) concluded that “considerable engaged communication research comforts those who are comfortable and further afflicts those who are afflicted” (p. 3980).

Given these criticisms, some communication researchers have emphasized the significance of engaged scholarship, with special sections on this form of research appearing in multiple communication journals (Barge, Simpson & Shockley-Zalabak, 2008; Carragee & Frey, 2016; Frey, 1998; Gunn & Lucaites, 2010; Milan, 2010). This context has influenced CAR’s character.

CAR emerged from Frey *et al.*’s social justice communication perspective (1996), defined as “the engagement with and advocacy for those in our society who are economically, socially, politically, and/or culturally underresourced” (p. 110). Other significant influences on CAR include critical theory, critical cultural studies, feminist perspectives, and MRAP (Carragee & Frey, 2016).

While CAR shares some similarities with other forms of engaged communication research, it differs from these approaches because of its emphasis on social justice, use of researcher interventions, and emphasis on collective action. CAR derives importance from its commitment to scholarship directly related to social justice, a commitment lacking in communication research in general and in most forms of engaged communication scholarship. It challenges powerful institutions, exposes inequalities, and works with and for marginalized groups. CAR interventions aid in the creation of, or assist established, collective actors to secure progressive reforms, based on the belief that change is produced through collective action.

The communication activism approach has generated a considerable research (Carragee, 2018; Carragee & Frey, 2016; Frey & Carragee, 2007a, 2007b, 2012) and teaching scholarship (Frey & Palmer, 2014). In 2014, this scholarship contributed to the formation of an Activism and Social Justice Division in the National Communication Association and, in 2016, it helped establish an Activism, Communication and Social Justice Interest Group in the International Communication Association. CAR’s integrated approach to research and activism has explored multiple issues, including racism (Groscurth, 2012), capital punishment (Asenas, McCann, Feyh & Cloud, 2012), reproductive health (Harter, Sharma, Pant, Singhal & Sharma, 2007), human trafficking (Carey, 2012), and sexual assault (Crabtree & Ford, 2007). Communication research can address these and other issues; unfortunately, this research, in general, and even engaged communication scholarship has made few contributions to promoting progressive political change, because researchers have not established partnerships with underresourced communities in an effort to advance their political goals.

The framing tradition has influenced some CAR interventions, indicating the effectiveness of researchers using their understanding of framing to help marginalized groups in their struggles for social justice. For example, influenced by both MRAP and CAR, Ryan and Jeffrey’s sustained collaboration advanced the ability of a social movement organization focusing on domestic violence to secure change. Drake (2012) employed framing research in her work with a grassroots group opposing factory farming and its environmental consequences. Other studies have used insights from framing research to help community groups influence news coverage of Boston’s housing crisis (Carragee, 2005), and the effort to regain a threatened community anchor in a fragile Boston neighbourhood (Carragee, 2018). In both cases, this activist research, by influencing news coverage, assisted grassroots groups in advancing their goals.

These examples also demonstrate that partnerships between scholars and progressive activists can address major limitations in framing research. These studies provide detailed discussions of how researchers and activists engage in the social construction of meaning through their collaborative approach to framing. They also provide insights on frame

sponsorship, detailing how community groups, assisted by activist scholars, influence news media coverage of specific issues, providing insight into the relationship between these organizations or groups and journalists. Additionally, given their engaged character, these studies analyze how activist groups confront and grapple with power inequalities that inform framing contests between elites and marginalized communities. Finally, some of these studies provide insights into the emotional as well as cognitive dimensions of framing as a process, thereby, once again, directly addressing an important shortcoming in framing research.

### **3. Conclusion**

I have provided insights on two central questions: How do we best understand the relationship between the news media and political change? How do we best understand the interaction between the news media and social movements?

We can enrich our understanding of issues raised by these questions in multiple ways. First, scholarship related to these questions needs to abandon the strong hegemony model, while still recognizing that power inequalities inform struggles between elites and progressive social movements in online and offline environments. Second, examinations of these questions should consider how the contemporary political and news media environment has been changed by digital activism, while simultaneously avoiding romanticized definitions of the transformative nature of digital activism in producing change. Third, scholarship exploring these questions should remain sensitive to historical and contextual issues, recognizing how movements and media technologies are connected to broader political and social processes.

Finally, we can examine these questions within framing scholarship, but this only can be done by addressing this perspective's limitations. Researchers can revitalize the framing tradition by: clarifying definitions of frames; exploring frame sponsorship and how power inequalities shape framing contests; examining framing as a social process linked to meaning production; analyzing the emotional as well as cognitive dimensions of framing. Moreover, engaged research can address shortcomings of framing scholarship, while simultaneously assisting social movements in securing progressive change.

This ambitious agenda provides an opportunity to deepen our understanding of the relationship between the news media and political change, and the interaction between social movements and the news media.

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