Political news, emotions, and opinion formation:
Toward a model of emotional framing effects

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Explanations of the impact of news frames have primarily focused on cognitive processes such as accessibility and applicability effects. However, several recent studies have found that frames also influence information processing and opinion formation by eliciting emotions. The present paper outlines a framing model that incorporates and integrates cognitive and emotional processes. In the model, news frames produce emotional effects on information processing and opinion formation through a three-step process: first, news frames make certain cognitive appraisals more accessible and/or applicable; second, news frames that trigger specific appraisal patterns make certain emotional responses more likely; and finally, frame-induced emotions prompt emotion-congruent information processing and opinion formation. The implications of the model and directions for future research are discussed.

Introduction

Media effects research has traditionally focused on the cognitive effects of media use. Predominant theories, such as agenda setting, cultivation, and media priming, claim that the effects of media content on audiences are based on cognitive processes (see Bryant & Oliver, 2009). Similarly, cognitive processes explain the effects of news frames. It is argued, for instance, that frames activate memory content and increase the importance of cognitive concepts (Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson, 1997; Price & Tewksbury, 1997).

Although Zillmann introduced emotion theory into communication research in the 1960s (see Bryant, Roskos-Ewoldsen, & Cantor, 2003) and interest in the influence of emotional processes has increased during the last two decades, the emotional effects of news frames have rarely been investigated. This is surprising because many studies have documented that media use triggers emotional responses as well as cognitive learning and evaluation processes (see Wirth & Schramm, 2005). Importantly, recent research has found that the framing of political news can elicit emotions that influence opinion formation (Gross, 2008; Kim & Cameron, 2011). However, to date, no comprehensive model of emotional framing effects has been proposed.

This article addresses the issue of how news frames elicit emotions and how these emotions influence the audience’s political opinions. A model is formulated which proposes that the cognitive processing of news frames may in some instances produce emotional responses, which influence opinions and behavior. The article is structured as follows. The first section defines the main theoretical concepts; the second section provides an overview of the cognitive effects of news frames; the third section reviews empirical findings on emotional framing effects; we then refer to appraisal theories of emotion to explain how news frames elicit emotions and, in the fifth section, we address the effects of emotions on opinions. The sixth section addresses the moderators of emotional framing effects. Finally, the model of emotional framing effects is summarized and implications as well as directions for future research are discussed.

Definitions

Investigating the effects of news frames requires a clear definition of what news frames are. Gamson and Modigliani (1987) define a media frame as “a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them” (p. 143) or as “a set of interpretative packages that give meaning to an issue” (1989, p. 3). Thus, frames are constructions of reality within news stories that promote certain interpretations of complex and ambiguous events and issues.

A common denominator among different conceptualizations of framing is the assumption that news frames influence interpretation both by highlighting and by linking certain aspects of an issue (Pan &
Kosicki, 1993; B. Scheufele, 2004; D. Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). For instance, B. Scheufele (2004) defines frames as patterns of interpretation that consist of a collection of salient objects and relations between objects. Thus, news frames make certain aspects of an issue salient and organize these aspects by displaying the relations between them.

Entman (1993) further specifies the types of information that are highlighted and connected by news frames. He argues that a frame emphasizes a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation. That is, frames identify the problem, the source of the problem, how the problem is to be evaluated, and the steps that are needed to solve the problem.

As a result, news frames can be understood as patterns of interpretation that highlight and link certain problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendations so that they promote a particular interpretation of an issue, which the audience may or may not adopt.

Based on this conceptualization of news frames, cognitive framing effects are regarded as a two-stage process: First, a news frame influences the recipients’ beliefs about an issue, more precisely, the frame influences the accessibility, applicability and importance, or content of beliefs (see next section). Beliefs are propositions or pieces of information about an issue or object (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Zajonc, 1998). Second, the pattern of beliefs produced by the news frame influences the recipient’s attitude toward the issue (e.g., Nelson et al., 1997).

Emotional processes can be distinguished from these (mainly) cognitive processes. Scherer (2001) defines emotion as “an episode of interrelated, synchronized changes in the states of all or most of the five organismic subsystems in response to the evaluation of an external or internal stimulus event as relevant to major concerns of the organism” (p. 93). Thus, emotions are elicited when an individual evaluates a situation as relevant to his or her needs. Moreover, emotions entail changes in a series of subsystems. These changes involve cognitions, bodily symptoms, behavioral intentions, motor expression and subjective feelings. As Oatley and Jenkins (1996) note, the core of an emotion is the readiness to act, that is, an emotion prompts the individual to follow a certain course of action. According to Le-Doux (1999), “emotion and cognition are best thought of as separate but interacting mental functions mediated by separate but interacting brain systems” (p. 69). Thus, emotions are, on the one hand, the product of cognitive evaluations, and, on the other hand, have substantial effects on cognitive processing and judgments. As we will discuss in more detail, emotional processes hence include cognitive processing steps.

**Theories of Cognitive Framing Effects**

Current approaches explain the adoption of news frames and their effects on subsequent judgments through cognitive mechanisms. One account is based on models of memory-based judgment formation, which assume that individuals rely on information that can be accessed in long-term memory when they form a judgment (see Hastie & Park, 1986). In this view, news frames influence which cognitions the recipient can access. By increasing the salience of particular aspects of an issue, news frames activate corresponding beliefs and increase their accessibility in memory (Iyengar, 1991; Price & Tewksbury, 1997). Thus, news frames function as media primes that influence which beliefs are accessible during judgment formation.

Because news frames typically link various aspects of issues, Price and Tewksbury (1997) argue that frames primarily have applicability effects (also see D. Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Applicability effects refer to the process through which the connection of two aspects in a news frame is adopted by the recipient (Price & Tewksbury, 1997). Because frames influence which relations between objects the recipient regards as plausible, frames affect the beliefs that recipients adopt as criteria for making a judgment. For instance, a news frame may relate asylum policy to either humanitarian or economic considerations. Depending on which relationships are emphasized, the recipient may regard either humanitarian or economic considerations as the appropriate basis for judging asylum policy.

Similarly, Nelson and colleagues (1997) argue that news frames operate by relating concepts and that it is the importance rather than the accessibility...
of a cognitive concept that determines whether the individual forms a judgment based on the concept. News frames thus influence which beliefs about an issue are viewed as relevant for arriving at a judgment.

Third, news frames can also present new information and, in doing so, change the content of beliefs (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2012; Slothuus, 2008). Thus, whereas the importance hypothesis assumes that news frames influence how existing beliefs are weighted in judgment processes, the content change hypothesis postulates that news frames influence opinions by conveying new beliefs to audiences.

**Empirical Findings of the Emotional Effects of News Frames and the Need for an Explanatory Model**

Although the cognitive framing approaches presented above do not account for the emotional effects of news frames, recent framing studies have found that news frames can elicit emotions and that these emotional reactions may influence opinion formation.

Several studies found that attributions of responsibility in news articles influence which emotions are elicited. Nerb and Spada (2001) conducted a series of experiments in which they presented participants with short articles about an environmental disaster and measured the extent to which these stories aroused anger and sadness. They found that whether participants responded with anger depended on whether responsibility was attributed to the actor that caused the catastrophic event. Articles that attributed higher levels of responsibility to the actor elicited more anger than articles that attributed low levels of responsibility. Furthermore, participants experienced greater anger and less sadness when the disaster was due to an agent’s voluntary or conscious actions. Although Nerb and Spada (2001) do not directly relate their findings to framing effects research, the results indicate that frame components such as causal interpretations influence the specific emotion that is elicited.

This notion is corroborated by the findings of Kim and Cameron (2011). In their experiment, participants read a news article about a cell phone battery explosion accident. Each participant was exposed to one of two news story frames. The first frame, which focused on the cell phone company’s intentional wrongdoing, was intended to elicit anger. The second frame, which focused on the victims’ suffering, was intended to elicit sadness. As expected, the two frames produced different levels of anger and sadness. Additional research (Kühne & Schemer, 2011) indicates that a news article about a traffic accident elicited more anger when the article focused on the driver’s reckless behavior rather than the consequences for the victims. In contrast, focusing on victims produced more sadness. Emotional reactions appear to depend on whether a news frame focuses on the agent responsible for an event or on the victims.

Further studies investigate the emotions activated by gain and loss frames. Cho and Boster (2008) found that gain frames for antidrug ads elicited more joy and contentment, whereas loss frames triggered more anger, fear, and sadness. Shen and Dillard (2007), who obtained similar results, demonstrated that an advantage frame triggered more happiness, whereas a disadvantage frame elicited more disgust, anger, fear, and sadness.

A series of studies examined the emotions elicited by episodic and thematic frames. Gross (2008) presented participants in an experiment with an article arguing against mandatory minimum sentences for drug offenses. She found that episodic frames that focused on the situation of a particular individual triggered more sympathy and pity than thematic frames that provided details on sentencing guidelines and costs. In addition, Gross and colleagues found that emotional responses to frames were moderated by audience predispositions, such as prior attitudes (Gross & Brewer, 2007) and political ideology (Gross & D’Ambrosio, 2004).

Few studies have examined how the emotions triggered by news frames affect audience attitudes. In the experiment described above, Gross (2008) investigated how frame-induced emotions influenced readers’ attitudes toward mandatory minimum sentences for drug offenses and found that episodic frames increased opposition to mandatory minimum sentences by increasing sympathy for drug addicts. That is, sympathy mediated the framing effect on audience attitudes. Similarly, Kim and Cameron
(2011) demonstrated that an article about a cell phone battery explosion accident produced significantly more negative attitudes toward the manufacturer of the cell phone battery when an anger frame was applied rather than a sadness frame. Finally, Kühne & Schemer (2011) found that the anger frame—in comparison to the sadness frame—increased the attention for punitive information, the preference for punitive solutions, and the behavioral intention to punish perpetrators.

The empirical findings indicate that news frames can trigger emotional responses as well as cognitive responses, which both may influence the recipients’ attitudes. However, a comprehensive model for the explanation of emotional framing effects has not been formulated. Our model, which integrates framing theory and emotion theory, provides an account of how news frames trigger emotions and how frame-induced emotions influence opinion formation. Furthermore, it addresses the conditions that moderate emotional framing effects.

The Elicitation of Emotions through News Frames

In this section, we first illustrate how appraisal theories of emotion explain emotional reactions to news frames. We then explicate that news frames are configurations of multiple components that influence the cognitive appraisals that trigger emotional reactions. Finally, two examples of ideal types of news frames are discussed that should elicit anger and sadness respectively.

The cognitive appraisal of news frames and elicitation of emotions

The elicitation of emotions through political news is mostly explained by appraisal theories of emotion (e.g., Gross, 2008; Nerb & Spada, 2001). Appraisal theories postulate that discrete emotions, such as anger, sadness, and pride, are produced by cognitive appraisals of events and situations (Lazarus, 1991; Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988; Scherer, 2001). According to these theories, individuals continuously evaluate their environment and, in doing so, they conduct a series of characteristic appraisals. Cognitive appraisals are often made automatically, but may also be the product of elaborate evaluation processes (Leventhal & Scherer, 1987). Most appraisal theories agree that the appraisal of valence, certainty, controllability, and responsibility are central to the elicitation of emotions (Roseman, 2001; Scherer, 2001; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). The appraisal of valence signifies whether an event is beneficial or detrimental to the individual. The appraisal of certainty specifies whether individuals are certain or uncertain about what is going on. Individuals also appraise whether a situation is controllable or not. Appraisals of high controllability indicate that an individual is able to cope with a situation, whereas appraisals of low controllability indicate that the situation is not under human control. The appraisal of responsibility specifies whether or not an actor is held responsible for an event.

Ortony and colleagues (1988) add that the aspect of reality (e.g., causal agents, consequences of events) that is the focus of the evaluation process should also be considered. The appraisal of the object focus should be particularly important in media consumption settings. Because media stimuli are inherently complex, individuals can focus on different aspects and their focus should influence what emotions are elicited.

Discrete emotions result from specific patterns or configurations of cognitive appraisals. For instance, anger results from the appraisal that a situation is highly negative, controllable, and certain, when responsibility is attributed to an actor, and when the primary focus is that actor’s behavior. Lazarus (1991) termed the central meaning of an appraisal pattern for an individual as the “core relational theme” of an emotion; for instance, the core relational theme of anger is that someone wrongfully harms another individual. Because emotions are the result of subjective evaluation processes, the same event or situation may be appraised differently and elicit different emotions in different individuals.

From appraisal theories of emotion the following hypothesis can be deduced: By highlighting and relating specific aspects of a political issue, a news frame promotes particular cognitive appraisals of the issue which may elicit emotions. In other words, when the central organizing idea (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987) of a news article matches the
core relational theme (Lazarus, 1991) of a discrete emotion, then the corresponding emotion is elicited. As a result, the same issue may elicit different emotions depending on how it is framed. By influencing the accessibility, applicability and importance, or the content of cognition, news frames may thus produce appraisal patterns that are associated with specific emotions and elicit the corresponding emotions.

The cognitive appraisal of news frames and elicitation of emotions

Other authors have also argued that emotional responses to news frames may be explained by appraisal theories (Gross, 2008; Kim & Cameron, 2011; Nabi, 2003). Gross (2008) explains that “if frames alter the information and considerations subjects have at hand, cognitive appraisal models would predict that emotional outputs should differ.” (p. 172). Similarly, Nabi (2003) states “it is possible that a message could contain certain features that elicit particular appraisal patterns to those in similar circumstances. If so, then appraisal pattern signifiers, like frames, appear in messages but may or may not be perceived by receivers.” (p. 227).

However, appraisal theory has not been fully theoretically integrated into framing theory. The argument that news frames elicit certain appraisals of issues is too general to explain emotional framing effects because it does not adequately consider what the main components of news frames are and how these components influence cognitive appraisals. But if we take the frame concept seriously, that is, if we do not merely understand it as a metaphor but as an analytical definition of an empirical phenomenon, then a model of emotional framing effects must explicitly relate the main components of frames—as defined by the frame definition which is employed—to the central appraisal dimensions in emotion theory. This theoretical specification is essential to precise hypotheses regarding the emotional effects of specific news frames.

For this purpose, the components that constitute a news frame must be clearly defined. We adopt Entman’s (1993) definition because of its high operational precision and wide use in communication research (Matthes, 2009). According to this definition, frames consist of four components—a problem definition, a causal interpretation, an explicit and/or implicit evaluation, and a treatment recommendation. Analytically, we regard these frame components and the central appraisal dimensions—object focus, valence, certainty, responsibility, and controllability—as variables that may take different values. Accordingly, we argue that values for particular frame components correspond to particular values for appraisal variables. We thus propose that news frames consist of four components that influence the recipients’ cognitive appraisals of an issue. When specific appraisal patterns are activated, emotions are elicited.

Two specifications are necessary. First, it should be noted that the meaning of an issue is the product of active interpretations by the audience (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Thus, news frame components only suggest but do not determine how an issue is appraised. Individual differences influence the interpretation of news frames and the intensity and quality of emotional responses (see below). Second, it is important to note that the theoretical discussion focuses on ideal news frames, that is, frames that exhibit four consistent components. Actual news articles often exhibit incomplete or mixed frames that do not include all frame components or contain contradictory components. However, emotion theory indicates that incomplete and mixed news frames should also elicit emotions (see Tong, 2010). These considerations are further addressed in the discussion section of the paper. Below, we first describe the four frame components. We then describe how ideal frames must be assembled to induce specific emotions.

The first frame component, the problem definition, establishes what a news frame is about (Matthes & Kohring, 2008). More precisely, it identifies the main issue of the news frame that is in dispute. We argue that the problem definition labels the unsettled problem and determines the most important events, actors, and affected individuals or groups that constitute the issue. The problem definition may promote a certain perspective by focusing on events, actors or affected individuals. Thus, the problem definition primarily influences appraisals of the object focus (see Ortony et al., 1988).

The causal interpretation identifies the causes of
A political problem. A problem may be caused by an actor or by external circumstances (Entman, 1993; Iyengar, 1991). Accordingly, the causal interpretation may attribute success or failure to an individual or a collective actor (e.g., a politician or a political party) or to external circumstances. For instance, flooding due to a thunderstorm may be interpreted as a situational cause, in contrast to an interpretation of personal responsibility if the flooding was attributed to the government’s inadequate precautionary measures. The causal interpretation of a news frame primarily influences appraisals of responsibility.

A news frame also includes explicit and/or implicit evaluations. The problem itself can be explicitly evaluated on a continuum ranging from “completely negative” to “completely positive”. Furthermore, the problem can be implicitly evaluated by just mentioning positive or negative aspects. Explicit evaluations of inherently negative issues, such as unemployment, criminality, or pollution, may differ with regard to their negativity. Thus, the explicit evaluation of a problem indicates how serious and urgent the problem is. The explicit evaluation essentially influences appraisals of valence.

The treatment recommendation identifies whether there are actors who are capable of solving the problem, who these actors are, and the course of action that should be taken. The competence of actors to solve the problem may also be explicitly denied. Hence, it may be argued that no actor is capable of solving the problem. In addition, recommendations may include not only requests to implement certain actions to solve the problem but also requests to refrain from certain actions. The treatment recommendation mainly influences appraisals of controllability.

Finally, appraisals of certainty should be influenced by all frame components. The problem definition can depict the various aspects of a problem as more or less certain. Similarly, causes, evaluations and solutions can be depicted as more or less certain.

Anger and sadness frames

Based on these frame components, we now explain how news frames must be constructed to trigger certain appraisals and elicit discrete emotions. Two representative types of emotional frames—anger and sadness frames—are presented and discussed. In principle, ideal frame configurations that elicit other emotions, such as hope, fear, or pride, could be also defined.

Anger Frames. Anger is a negative emotion that is triggered when an individual is prevented from reaching her/his goals or is intentionally harmed by someone but has the capabilities to overcome the obstacle or punish the culprit. According to appraisal theories, anger results from the appraisal that a situation is highly negative, controllable, and certain, when responsibility is attributed to an actor, and when the primary focus is that actor’s behavior. Anger prompts the individual to actively confront the problem and/or punish the culprit (Lazarus, 1991; Ortony et al., 1988; Roseman, Wiest, & Swartz, 1994).

The problem definition of an anger frame focuses on the actions of actors “which are things considered in light of their actual or presumed instrumentality or agency in causing or contributing to events” (Ortony et al., 1988, p. 18). Although other aspects of an issue may be addressed, the primary emphasis is on the actions of actors. More precisely, behaviors are focused that are unwanted because they violate social norms or produce negative consequences.

The second frame component is the causal interpretation. In an anger frame, the responsibility for a political problem is attributed to an actor. Attributions of responsibility increase with the degree to which a problem is traced back to the actor’s behavior. Higher levels of responsibility for a political problem promote more intense anger reactions. Although an actor may have caused a problem, attributions of responsibility may be limited when the actor did not act intentionally, the actor caused the problem when pursuing a higher normative goal, or when the actor could not estimate the consequences of her/his actions (Nerb & Spada, 2001; Ortony et al., 1988). Thus, anger frames ideally focus on intentional and self-centered wrongdoing.

Explicit and/or implicit negative evaluations also support anger responses because attributions of responsibility for the situation produce anger only if the recipients are aware that a situation is negative. Furthermore, anger reactions are intensified when
the actions are explicitly evaluated as reprehensible and violations of social norms. Accordingly, an ideal anger frame explicitly evaluates the problem and the causal behaviors as negative.

Anger reactions are increased when a news frame depicts a problem as solvable and thus controllable. A problem can be depicted as controllable by explicitly describing it as solvable, by identifying actors who are capable of solving the problem, and by associating treatment recommendations with specific actors. Anger may also be intensified when a news frame identifies the punishment of the culprit as the appropriate solution to the problem. Accordingly, an ideal anger frame specifies that it is possible to take active steps to solve the problem and that culprits can be punished.

Finally, in an anger frame, it is argued that an actors has caused a problem with certainty which leads to appraisals of high certainty. In summary, an ideal anger frame focuses on the undesirable actions of actors who are regarded as responsible for a problem. The behaviors of these actors are explicitly criticized and punishment is recommended.

Sadness Frames. Sadness is a negative emotion that is triggered when an individual experiences a physical or psychological loss or fails to reach a goal, particularly if the loss is severe and likely to be irrevocable (Lazarus, 1991; Ortony et al., 1988). According to appraisal theories, sadness results from the appraisal that a situation is highly negative, uncontrollable, and certain, when no responsibility is attributed to any actor, and when the focus is the consequences experienced by affected individuals. The action tendency in response to sadness is to compensate for the loss and/or provide consolation. In other words, sadness prompts individuals to assist victims and to repair the damage (Nerb & Spada, 2001; Roseman et al., 1994).

The problem definition of a sadness frame focuses on the negative consequences of events “which are simply people’s construals about things that happen, considered independently of any beliefs they may have about actual or possible causes” (Ortony et al., 1988, p. 18). Central to the problem definition of a sadness frame are the difficulties or the suffering of individuals. The effects on victims are emphasized rather than focusing on behaviors that caused the problem.

In sadness frames, the cause of the problem is attributed to external circumstances, and the problem is identified as beyond the control or responsibility of any actor. In particular, it is argued that the victims’ predicament occurred through no fault of their own and that they do not bear any responsibility. Even if an actor caused the problem, responsibility may be diminished by arguing that the actor did not act intentionally, was pursuing a higher goal, or was unaware of the consequences of her/his actions (Nerb & Spada, 2001).

In a sadness frame, the situation of the victims is explicitly evaluated as severe and disturbing (i.e., it is negatively evaluated). In addition, the behaviors of involved actors are not criticized because the problem is assumed to have situational causes. Instead, in an ideal sadness frame, the behaviors of agents and victims are explicitly evaluated as positive, and it is argued that the predicament occurred although everyone acted appropriately.

Sadness frames indicate that solving the problem is difficult or impossible. Thus, it may be argued that no actor is able to solve the problem or that tremendous efforts must be made. The treatment recommendations focus on measures to help the victims and relieve their suffering, if possible.

Finally, in a sadness frame, the problem is depicted as certainly having negative consequences for victims which supports appraisals of high certainty. In short, an ideal sadness frame focuses on the negative consequences for victims. Because situational factors are assumed to have caused the suffering, responsibility is not attributed to any actor and problem-solving recommendations focus on assisting victims.

How Emotions Elicited by News Frames Influence Opinion Formation

Numerous psychological studies have investigated how emotions influence judgments (see Kühne, 2012). These studies have revealed that discrete emotions have distinct effects on information processing and judgment formation (e.g., DeSteno, Petty, Rucker, Wegener, & Braverman, 2004; Lerner & Keltner, 2000; Nerb & Spada, 2001). Lerner and
Keltner (2000; also cf. Han, Lerner, & Keltner, 2007) provide a seminal theoretical framework, which is based on cognitive appraisal theories and functional theories of emotion. In their appraisal-tendency framework (ATF), discrete emotions promote emotion-congruent information processing and judgment formation. Based on cognitive appraisal theories, the ATF postulates that emotions result from specific configurations of appraisals. This first step is termed cognition-to-emotion. In a second step, termed emotion-to-cognition, emotions may then influence evaluations: “… emotions not only can arise from but give rise to an implicit cognitive predisposition to appraise future events in line with the central appraisal patterns or appraisal themes that characterize the emotions” (Han et al., 2007, p. 160). In other words, the cognitive appraisals associated with an emotion are projected onto subsequent assessments; therefore, emotions create a tendency to evaluate situations in an emotion-congruent way. This emotional feedback hypothesis is borrowed from functional emotion theories (Lazarus, 1991; Ortony et al., 1988), which posit that emotions support the adaption of individuals to their environment. For example, anger promotes appraisals of high responsibility and focuses attention on information related to punishment. In contrast, sadness promotes appraisals of low responsibility and focuses attention on information related to the relief of suffering. Thus, there is a reciprocal relationship between cognitions and emotions. Cognitive appraisals elicit emotions, and emotions influence the content of thought and thus opinions (for similar propositions see DeSteno et al., 2004; Nabi, 2003).

It is important to note that emotions create a general tendency to evaluate media information in an emotion-congruent way. Although an emotion may be triggered by the specific information in a news article, it may influence a range of evaluations that are not be logically related to the information that triggered the emotion. For instance, an article may attribute responsibility for unemployment to the government, which may trigger anger. In turn, this anger response not only influences judgments regarding the government but also judgments regarding related objects, such as employers, jobless individuals, and labor unions.

Furthermore, emotions are inherently linked to motivation and behavior. Functional theories of emotion (Lazarus, 1991; Roseman et al., 1994) hold that emotions enable individuals to adapt to their environment by motivating appropriate response behaviors (Lazarus, 1991). Cognitive appraisals inform individuals about situational demands and the resulting emotions facilitate an adaptive response. For example, anger motivates the individual to punish the culprit, whereas sadness instructs the individual to assist victims.

As a result, the emotions induced by news frames have significant implications for opinion formation. Discrete emotions promote emotion-congruent opinions and behaviors.

**Moderators of emotional framing effects**

Framing research has identified various factors that moderate the cognitive effects of news frames, such as prior knowledge regarding the framed issue and existing attitudes (e.g., Druckman & Nelson, 2003). In addition to moderators of cognitive effects, the model of emotional framing effects includes variables that affect emotional processes. Both theoretical considerations and empirical findings reveal that specific moderators influence emotional framing effects. Because news frames may elicit emotions that then influence opinion formation, the model proposes two sets of moderating variables: those that influence emotion elicitation through cognitive appraisals and those that influence the attitudinal effects of emotions.

The intensity of emotional reactions to news frames depends on additional characteristics of news articles, such as the narrative structure and the level of realism. Emotions are intensified by the narrative structure of an article. Articles that focus on a series of events and actions involving specific individuals rather than abstract information elicit stronger emotions (Gross, 2008; Zillmann & Knobloch, 2001). Because the intensity of emotions also increases when individuals perceive a situation as real (Ortony et al., 1988), media narratives with a high level of realism also elicit intense emotional reactions.

In addition to the news article’s properties, characteristics of the recipient influence the elicitation of
emotions. Individuals have personal propensities to interpret situations in a certain way and hence experience particular emotions (e.g., Lerner & Keltner, 2000; Sonnemans & Frijda, 1995). For instance, some individuals experience anger or sadness more often and more intensely than others. As a result, emotional reactions to news frames are moderated by emotion traits such as the recipient’s trait anger or trait sadness. Individuals also differ in their motivation to approach or avoid emotion-inducing situations. A high need for affect (Maio & Esses, 2001) thus promotes strong emotional reactions to news frames. For news frames that are intensively processed, emotional reactions depend on whether the recipient understands the presented information and produces cognitive appraisals. Political sophistication, which enables individuals to understand political information and form cognitive appraisals, thus supports emotional responses (Miller, 2011). In contrast, for news frames that are processed with low effort, emotion elicitation depends on the availability of emotional schemata that can be activated (Leventhal & Scherer, 1987). Finally, existing attitudes as well as political ideology influence whether news frames elicit emotions (Gross & Brewer, 2007; Gross & D’Ambrosio, 2004). Negative emotions are intensified when a news frame attacks the beliefs of the recipient, and positive emotions are intensified when the recipient’s position is supported.

Additional moderator variables influence the strength of the emotional impact on recipients’ opinions. Generally, strong prior attitudes inhibit attitude change (Druckman & Nelson, 2003) and emotional framing effects. The influence of emotions may also be reduced when recipients try to regulate their emotions; individuals who perceive emotional experiences to be highly unpleasant (Harmon-Jones, Harmon-Jones, Amodio, & Gable, 2011) or who disapprove of emotions for normative reasons (Eid & Diener, 2001) engage in emotion regulation. In contrast, emotional framing effects should be stronger for recipients with a high affective orientation, who tend to rely on feelings to form judgments (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1996). For news frames that are intensively processed, the individual’s need for cognition (Petty & Cacioppo, 1982), which is the tendency to engage in and enjoy thinking, moderates emotional influences (DeSteno et al., 2004). The more recipients deliberate on an issue, the more mental operations are likely to be influenced by emotions. For news frames that are processed with low effort, however, emotional framing effects should be stronger when the recipient has prior knowledge about the issue that can be activated by emotions (Nabi, 2003).

Altogether, the literature finds that the extent to which news frames elicit emotion and the emotional impact on recipients’ opinions are moderated by characteristics of the news article and the recipient. It is important to note that certain variables may simultaneously facilitate emotion elicitation and inhibit emotional influences on opinion. For instance, strong political attitudes may facilitate emotional reactions but reduce attitude change due to emotions. Because most earlier studies do not directly address the emotional effects of news frames, the proposed effects of the moderator variables on emotional framing processes need to be empirically tested.

A Model of Emotional Framing Effects

In the previous sections aspects of a model of emotional framing effects were described. The model is based on two main propositions. First, news frames consist of four components (i.e., a problem definition, causal interpretation, explicit and/or implicit evaluation, and a treatment recommendation) that influence the recipients’ cognitive appraisals of an issue. When specific appraisal patterns are activated, corresponding emotions are elicited. Accordingly, the same issue may elicit different emotions depending on how the issue is framed. Second, emotions induced by news frames lead to emotion-congruent information processing, judgment formation, and behaviors. The model is summarized in Figure 1. As the figure indicates, the integration of the two main propositions reveals that emotional framing effects are a three-step process. First, news frames influence the accessibility, applicability and importance, or the content of cognition and thus produce certain appraisals. Second, the triggered appraisal patterns elicit emotional responses. Third, the emotional responses prompt emotion-congruent information pro-
cessing and opinion formation in regard to the framed issue. Furthermore, the model assumes that emotion elicitation and emotional influences on opinions are moderated by news article and recipient characteristics. Thus, the model makes specific testable predictions regarding the conditions that determine when news frames will produce emotional effects. It identifies the news frames that elicit emotions, the processes that underlie emotion activation, how emotions influence opinion formation, and the conditions that affect the magnitude of emotional framing effects.

A recent study (Kühne & Schemer, 2011) corroborates the assumption that emotional framing effects involve a three-step process. In this experiment, we found that manipulating the causal interpretation of a news article regarding traffic accidents indirectly influenced recipients’ attitudes toward road safety measures. Participants who read an article attributing responsibility for a traffic accident to the driver of the car formed higher appraisals of personal responsibility, experienced more intense anger, and preferred punitive measures and behaviors intended to punish traffic offenders compared to participants in the no responsibility and control conditions. Importantly, the influence of the cognitive appraisal of personal control on the preference for punitive measures was fully mediated by experienced anger. Apparently, news frames may influence opinion formation by activating cognitive appraisals that elicit emotions.

The proposed model complements approaches that base framing effects exclusively on cognitive processes (e.g., Nelson et al., 1997; Price & Tewksbury, 1997). News frames may indeed have a (direct) impact on attitudes by influencing which cog-
ntions are accessible and/or applicable during judgment formation. However, when these cognitive processes activate certain appraisal patterns, the news frames may also trigger emotions. The attitudinal effects of such news frames are thus mediated by emotions as well as cognitions. We do not assume that effects of emotional frames are always fully mediated by the emotions triggered by a news frame. Rather, the relative contribution of cognition and emotion also depends on the extent of available cognitive information and emotional intensity. The higher the intensity of the induced emotion, the stronger its influence on opinion will be. Importantly, the model assumes that variables moderating emotional framing processes may differ from those moderating cognitive framing processes. For instance, the intensity of the emotional response to a news frame depends on the recipient’s emotional predispositions, while the effects of the emotions on attitudes depend on the individual’s tendency to regulate emotion.

By considering emotional framing processes and the conditions that moderate these emotional processes, the predictive power of framing effects models is increased. This is particularly true because cognitive and emotional processes produce different attitudinal outcomes in many cases. For example, the emotional effect of a news frame may be significantly stronger than its cognitive effect for recipients who largely base their opinions on their feelings. We thus propose that emotional processes should be considered when investigating the effects of news frames.

Discussion

In this paper, we outlined a theoretical model that explains how news frames influence opinions by eliciting emotions. The model proposes that emotional framing effects are based on a three-step process, and preliminary findings support this assumption (Kühne & Schemer, 2011). However, further research is necessary to deepen our understanding of emotional framing effects.

This paper identified the ideal configurations of two types of emotional frames (i.e., anger and sadness frames). However, frame configurations that elicit other emotions can be formulated based on the depicted framework, and future research should investigate the effects of emotions such as fear, guilt, or envy. Particular attention should also be paid to the effects of positive emotions such as hope or pride, which have traditionally been disregarded in persuasion research. Focus on particular emotions is important because each emotion is associated with a specific tendency to evaluate media information and thus results in specific political preferences.

To illustrate the model, the paper focused on ideal frame configurations that elicit pure, intense emotions. However, news articles often exhibit incomplete or mixed frame configurations because journalists assume prior knowledge of the reader or attempt to provide a balanced account of an issue. Thus, the emotional effects of incomplete frames that lack certain frame components and mixed frames that present different interpretations must also be investigated. Current psychological research reveals that emotions may be elicited, although no complete appraisal pattern is activated. Emotions may be even elicited by single appraisals (Tong, 2010). Therefore, the model proposes that incomplete news frames also have the potential to elicit emotions. For instance, a news article that attributes blame to an actor but lacks other frame components is likely to produce appraisals of personal responsibility which may be sufficient to elicit anger. Similarly, mixed frames that produce inconsistent appraisal patterns may produce multiple or mixed emotions (i.e., a blend of multiple emotions). For instance, an article that focuses on both the agents and victims of a negative event might elicit both anger and sadness. Because each emotion is associated with a specific tendency to evaluate media information, emotional blends are likely to have complex effects on opinion formation. In this context, communication researchers should also investigate the conditions that influence the magnitude of emotional framing effects because the effects of incomplete and mixed frames—just like the effects of ideal emotional news frames—might be moderated by news article and recipient characteristics. For example, an incomplete frame may, for example, elicit a strong emotional response when the recipient has prior knowledge regarding the issue that enables
her/him to complete the appraisal pattern.

An account of the emotional effects of news frames has implications for the design of content analyses, surveys, and experiments that investigate framing effects. We suggest that content analyses be designed to identify frame configurations that are likely to elicit emotions. Based on the theoretical account of how appraisals are related to frame components, codebooks and content categories can be developed to assess the extent to which news articles facilitate certain appraisals. Furthermore, survey research and experiments investigating framing effects should measure recipients’ emotional responses and individual moderators of emotional processes such as emotion traits. Incorporating these measures into content analyses and questionnaires will enable researchers to investigate and predict the effects of news frames more precisely and accurately.

Finally, the investigation of emotional framing effects has normative implications. Cognitive framing effects are often regarded as detrimental to political deliberation processes because framing is considered to be a manipulation of the public discourse through elites (cf. Druckman & Nelson, 2003). However, emotional effects are viewed as even more problematic because they not only bias the recipients’ perceptions and preferences, but also operate through processes that are regarded as inherently irrational. From a normative standpoint, distinguishing between cognitive and emotional processes and achieving a better understanding of both types of processes are thus critical for the evaluation of media effects. Only when we identify which types of news frames trigger emotions and how these emotions influence political opinion formation will we be able to evaluate the quality of political news and deliberation processes in the light of democracy theory and formulate recommendations for the design of news.

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