Frame Analysis: Exploring network tensions through organisational press releases

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to introduce frame analysis and to consider the particular contribution that this research technique may make in exploring network tensions or, more specifically, the diverse effects that an organisation's mass communications may have upon diverse audiences.

The paper outlines the development and key areas of application of frame analysis noting that frame analysis is based upon the idea of communication as impression management. It then considers the activities primarily of the organisation in the framing of key issues in the mass communication channels that, by implication, are likely to reach multiple 'stakeholders', who are viewed as relevant members of the organisation's network. Frame analysis is then illustrated by exploring a well publicised crisis within the supply network of a major UK company. The case that I consider is failure in BA's food supply and subsequent wildcat strike amongst workers through industrial action at a Heathrow supplier, Gate Gourmet. The paper concludes by considering what the unique understanding generated by frame analysis is and the problems and limitations associated with the technique.

Frame analysis

Frame analysis is introduced by Goffman (1974). Definitions of framing point to a constructionist ontology and highlight the epistemological role of frames as a means of producing and re-producing more generalised understandings about the world. Frames involve the selection and presentation of issues depending upon tacit theories about what exists, what happens and what matters (Tuchman 1978).

It is within Media Studies that concepts of framing have been developed to see framing as the active and purposeful selection of the frame applied in the presentation of a narrative. In this context framing is seen as an active and selective process whereby that which is reported and the manner of its reporting supports preferred identities and portrays appropriately motivated actions, whilst naturalising the logic which explains those actions and identities. This is achieved with a view to the political, social and commercial effects of the frame. The crafted framing of the journalist is explained since they are seen as professional symbol handlers – the status has also been applied to politicians. The aim of framing is to cause audiences to focus upon particular considerations and interpretations in forming their opinion.

Framing and networks

This paper argues that 'organisations', or more specifically their Management and Press Officers, are also professional symbol handlers. However, the effectiveness of their preferred form of framing is complicated by two issues. Firstly, organisations may often be unable to communicate directly with all audiences whose opinions they wish to influence – audiences may gain information through mediated reporting. Secondly, the organisation is embedded in a complex network of diverse actors and may therefore see their interests as best served by framing one issue in diverse ways for diverse audiences. Taken together these issues pose a

problem in that the organisation makes press releases that are open to use (abuse) by a generalised media.

In the light of these theories my concern is to consider how frame analysis assists in a fuller understanding of
a/ the efforts and effects of an organisation in framing issues through their press releases.
b/ the 'costs' of framing in press releases given the differential effects that any one framing will have across diverse audiences.

The analysis

British Airways' operations from its hub airport were initially disrupted and then halted through a strike at their food supplier Gate Gourmet that rapidly spread to strike action within British Airways. Through a ten day period in August 2005 there was intense media coverage. Whilst, arguably, British Airways' operational hands were tied, their representational hands became all the more important as they sought to communicate their position. Taking a network view there were multiple and significant audiences to such communication efforts including: employees, consumers, shareholders, and other suppliers. Each constituency has implications for British Airways' ability to implement desired strategies into the future. The empirical work commences by delineating audiences and considering how their responses to BA's handling of the crisis would impact upon the firm's ability to implement stated future strategies.

BA press releases serve as the empirical data through which framing is analysed. Using methods adopted from Creed, Langstraat and Scully (2002) the frames mobilised by BA in their press releases are interrogated to explore the identity and rationale being presented and the likely effects upon opinion amongst key network members. Some alternative frames are illustrated through public media reports.

The efficacy of frame analysis is then explored by relating BA's and alternative framings to opinion formation amongst key audiences. In particular the contradictory responses across key audiences are noted so that the 'costs' of framing can be appraised.

Conclusions

The conclusions consider how frame theory provides a new perspective upon the politics of interpretation in complex network situations. At the same time, by looking at press office comment as purposeful, crafted and political activity, frame analysis provides a useful technique to explore the limits of directive and active management that any organization can exert in the network. In total these contributions highlight the difficulty of 'professional symbol handling' in complex networks.

Despite these contributions, some problems with the technique are identified. The particular the role of the researcher in identifying and interpreting data is questioned. Direct organisational comment would reduce researcher instrumentality yet framing theory itself has strong implications for the status of such comment.

References

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