HOSTILE FRAME TAKEOVER: CO-OPTING THE SECURITY FRAME IN THE GERMAN NUCLEAR ENERGY DEBATE

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ABSTRACT

Despite growing attention to framing contests as important discursive struggles in articulating societal challenges and their solutions, most research has focused on competition over which frame becomes dominant. Less attention has been devoted to how macro-level master frames themselves are subjected to processes of meaning elaboration, although these are central for understanding field level dynamics. In this paper, we focus on how a master frame—seen as a relatively stable macro-level meaning structure—can be co-opted, meaning that it is reinterpreted to support a logic of action that is contrary to the original set of meanings.

INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH QUESTION

Discursive struggles between competing actors over contested issues, technologies, and events are an important way to build legitimacy and garner public support (Ansari, Wijen, & Gray, 2013; Hoffman, 1999; Rao, Monin, & Durand, 2003; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Weber, Heinze, & DeSoucey, 2008). Relatedly, frames and framing have emerged as a key lens that allows us to explore these discursive struggles by focusing on how a frame—understood as an "interpretative schema that simplifies and condenses 'the world out there,' thus organizing experience and guiding action by rendering events or occurrences meaningful" (Snow & Benford, 1992: 137)—is deployed to draw attention to preferred aspects of contested issues, problems and solutions, develop a particular shared reality, and mobilize supporters (Benford & Snow, 2000; Diehl & McFarland, 2010; Litrico & David, 2017; Reinecke & Ansari, 2016; Reinecke & Ansari, 2020).

However, despite the preponderance of research on frames and framing, scholars have typically treated framing—which is an inherently dynamic concept—as a static process. With few exceptions (Klein & Amis, 2020; Lee, Ramus, & Vaccaro, 2018; Reinecke & Ansari, 2020), they have neglected the interactional dynamics of framing. Instead, current research has tended to focus on how actors use specific frames to confront targets and mobilize supporters (e.g.

Weber et al., 2008); how targeted actors respond to such framing (McDonnell & King, 2013); and on the operation of framing contests (Kaplan, 2008), wherein competing actors use different, typically conflicting frames (Gurses & Ozcan, 2015; Nyberg, Wright, & Kirk, 2020).

This emphasis has implications for both theories of framing and our understanding of how framing is used to shape significant societal issues or grand challenges in the media. First, the focus on framing contests and how actors use specific frames draws attention towards a particular type of discursive struggle, wherein different actors are associated with different static frames and deploy them as competing discursive tools. However, prior research has shown that even dominant, well-established frames are not static meaning structures (Ansari et al., 2013; Hoffman, 2001). Instead, the taken-for-granted meanings associated with such frames can be "problematized" (Maguire & Hardy, 2009). Second, research has also tended to overemphasize the agentic nature of framing, presenting it as an outcome of strategic, deliberate choices and purposeful action (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014). However, a substantial body of research shows that an actor's choice of frames is neither unrestricted nor highly agentic (Diehl & McFarland, 2010; Reinecke & Ansari, 2020). Instead, actors typically tap into a limited set of dominant societal frames, also referred to as "master frames" (see Snow & Benford, 1992; Swart, 1995; McCammon et al., 2007).

A master frame, according to (Snow & Benford, 1992: 138), performs interpretive functions analogous to linguistic codes that "provide a grammar that punctuates and syntactically connects patterns and or happenings in the world." What has been less appreciated is that these master frames are not fixed in their interpretive possibilities (Snow & Benford, 1992: 139). In fact, the meanings of these master frames are subject to interpretive struggles. Furthermore, while a substantial body of framing research uses media data, our understanding of how societal issues are constructed in public media is limited by aforementioned theoretical assumptions, which focus on specific actors and frame labels, and not the dynamic process of framing. In this paper, we explore such hitherto underemphasized dynamic and interactional aspects of meaning elaboration of master frames. We thus ask the following question: How—and through which mechanisms and processes—can (dominating) frames be reinterpreted so that they follow a logic of action that is contrary to the original meaning?

With our study guided by this question, we contribute to the framing literature by theorizing a dynamic framing process which complements our understanding of framing contests. We also offer a novel explanatory approach to the societal discussion on the reinterpretation and reversal of central frames in liberal democracies; such as the "security" frame (which we study in our paper) but such a perspective is also important to better understand populists' co-optation of the "democracy" frame.

METHODS AND CASE

We studied the reinterpretation of master frames by looking at the German debate on nuclear energy. The debate on nuclear energy is an ideal example for researchers concerned with the dynamics of framing as it is a highly contested issue to which actors apply a wide variety of arguments and associated meanings, e.g., future technology, unlimited growth, and total destruction (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Garud, Gehman, & Karnøe, 2010; Geels & Verhees, 2011). The security of nuclear energy is thus a long-term issue that has always been on the political agenda, especially due to nuclear accidents and meltdowns (Patriotta, Gond, & Schultz, 2011). We examined the contentious debate on nuclear energy using German media sources

between 1995 and 2016, as Germany has arguably had the most dynamic and controversial nuclear phase-out debate in recent history. The period covers the consequential and contradictory decisions to phase out nuclear power (2000) and offer it a lifetime extension (2010).

We deployed a mixed-method approach that innovatively integrated the strengths of inductive machine learning (topic modeling) and traditional grounded theory approaches to capture the specific mechanisms through which various meanings came to be associated with the dominant frame in the field and to examine the actors who undertook this meaning (re)construction.

Our main data source was media coverage of the nuclear energy issue in Germany (Figure 1). Public media offered a time-authentic longitudinal data set, covering the controversial debate from a more general viewpoint, including the different positions of the proponents and opponents of nuclear energy (see also historical studies by Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Geels & Verhees, 2011). Hence, we sought to investigate both the general development of the debate and how frames were deployed by actors during this period of discursive struggles.

Insert Figure 1 about here.

To analyze our large data set, we chose a machine-learning approach: the LDA topic modeling algorithm. Topic modeling is a relatively new method in management studies (Hannigan et al., 2019; Kaplan & Vakili, 2015; Schmiedel, Müller, & vom Brocke, 2019). However, it has been proved useful by recent studies that used this technique to map and analyze the content of patents (Kaplan & Vakili, 2015), websites (Powell, Horvath, & Brandtner, 2016), and frames (DiMaggio, Nag, & Blei, 2013; Fligstein, Brundage, & Schultz, 2017). By using topic modeling, we obtained the specific frequency for each topic (and frame) in each document. This allowed us to assess the salience of the topics and topic categories over time. When plotting all topic categories over time, it became apparent that the security frame dominated the nuclear energy debate, with media coverage of more than 30%. We also used the topic distribution per article to filter meaningful articles for qualitative analysis.

After the topic modeling analysis, we examined the specific ways in which actors constructed and reconstructed what the most dominant frame—security—was about. That is, we focused on the mechanisms through which different and even conflicting meanings were attached to the security frame. We thus conducted an in-depth qualitative analysis on a sub-sample of randomly selected articles from our data corpus. Based on the topic modeling findings, i.e., the distribution of topics per document, we filtered all documents with high relevance for the security framing (occurrence of security topics based on a threshold of 0.5). We then randomly selected 545 articles, which represented 10% of the sample. Two of the authors started by undertaking an open and inductive coding (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013) of the articles to identify the role of different actors in the process of constructing and reconstructing the security frame.

Overall, the two-step procedure combining qualitative and machine learning approaches allowed us to capture the dominant frame and the related categories. Additionally, it provided us with in-depth insights into the process of frame co-optation and the role of actors in this process.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

We present our findings on the co-optation process of the security frame in the German nuclear energy debate in two steps. First, we provide insights into the changes in this debate over time based on findings from the topic modeling, showing the development of the dominant security frame over the 22-year period covered by our analysis. Figure 2 illustrates the overall development of the discourse. It shows that phase I was dominated by security as an anti-nuclear energy frame—security issues were the rationale for phasing out nuclear energy. Later, the meaning of security changed, and security became increasingly important as an argument for nuclear energy. Ultimately, this reading came to dominate the discourse in 2010, the year of the lifetime extension.

Insert Figure 2 about here.

Second, we shed light on the mechanisms underlying this development, giving insights into how this socially resonant and initially *anti-nuclear* security frame was co-opted by atomic power proponents, who changed its meaning to support the industry's *pro-nuclear* agenda.

Specifically, our analysis shows that both the opponents (social movements and environmental organizations and Social Democratic and Green Party) and proponents (nuclear energy industry actors and the Conservative Party) of nuclear energy struggled over the same security frame. However, we find that proponents associated new and conflicting meanings with the "security" master frame after the nuclear phase-out decision, co-opting it in the process. Opponents of nuclear energy predominantly and consistently used technical security issues, drawing attention to the deleterious environmental impact of a potential nuclear melt-down and the challenges posed by nuclear waste. In contrast, proponents of nuclear energy predominantly used meanings associated with climate security (controlling carbon emissions), economic security (growth and job creation), and supply security (predictable energy supply) to broaden and reverse the dominant frame. We developed a model of frame co-optation that outlines these two interlinked mechanisms of broadening and reversing.

More specifically, these two mechanisms were used by nuclear energy proponents to co-opt the security frame in the German nuclear energy debate. First, broadening describes the infusion of the master frame with new diagnostic claims and thus a re-opening of the debate about the future of nuclear energy despite the recently taken phase-out decision. It involved the discrediting of nuclear energy opponents and their arguments, the call for a renewed debate, and the introduction of new meanings of security. As argued above, three other aspects of security gained visibility in the nuclear energy debate in the second phase: the need for nuclear energy to maintain a secure energy supply, guarantee economic stability and low energy prices, and achieve climate security, i.e., to protect people from "catastrophic" climate change.

While the broadening of the frame to encompass an additional set of meanings of "security" re-opened the debate around the future of nuclear energy, a second mechanism—reversing—ensured that those meanings were attached to the security frame that was conducive to the pro-nuclear energy coalition, i.e., it facilitated interpretations of the security frame that favored nuclear energy. Reversing involved the selective retention of meanings and the detaching of the original meanings, ultimately leading to the reversal of the overall master frame.

Our findings revealed the three steps that were necessary to reverse the frame: atomic power proponents pointed to conflicts within the broadened meanings, allowing them to play the different meanings off against each other, they constructed new discursive alliances around favored meanings, and, finally, they reversed the frame by relativizing the old meaning.

Hence, we show how rather than having different frames competing with one another, it was the security frame itself that changed its character. Through these shifts, nuclear energy changed from being predominantly seen as a technical and societal security risk—a risk that was then used as the main justification for the first nuclear phase-out—to a guarantor of climate safety and a secure (and reliable) supply of energy.

Summarizing, we explored how a master frame can be co-opted and reinterpreted to support a logic of action that is contrary to the original set of meanings. Our findings depict the "hostile takeover" of the dominant and socially resonant "security" master frame. Thereby, our analysis makes two key contributions. First, we contribute to the literature on discursive struggles through framing by drawing attention to the fact that actors do not just compete in a framing contest over which frame becomes socially resonant and dominant but also compete over the meaning of a dominant frame. Additionally, we discuss the implications of our study for the discussion on the reinterpretation and reversal of central frames in liberal democracies, such as the industry's co-optation of the "security" frame or populists' co-optation of the "democracy" frame. This perspective could also help scholars to understand other issues, e.g., how politically extreme groups attempt hostile takeovers of central democracy frames by pointing to the supposed will of the people and thus delegitimize democratic decision-making processes.

We have recently seen how "democracy" as a master frame underwent significant meaning reversals as it was co-opted by populist forces. Once seen as a progressive frame firmly embedded in a strong tradition of political theory, it has seen a "transmutation of the democratic principles" (Urbinati, 2019: 111). Its ideological core of "government by the people" has been co-opted to support the agendas of right-wing populists seeking to justify Brexit in the UK and other forms of nationalism in the United States, Hungary, and India, or to bolster anti-science movements during the global COVID-19 pandemic. This subversion was especially visible when then-president Trump declared the 2020 election "stolen" in the name of "democracy" and his wife claimed that "The American people deserve fair elections… We must protect our democracy with complete transparency." (https://twitter.com/flotus/status/1325509832594616328?lang=de). The mobilization of the dominant and socially resonant frames of "democracy," "fairness," and "transparency" made it much harder to rebut these false claims. While we have taken a first step towards understanding how the meaning of frames can be reversed, future scholarship can further explore how associations are made and re-made, what endows actors with the legitimacy to establish new associations, and how the co-optation of frames can be resisted.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHOR(S)

FIGURES

Figure 1. Key events and frequency of media articles (APO=atomic phase out)
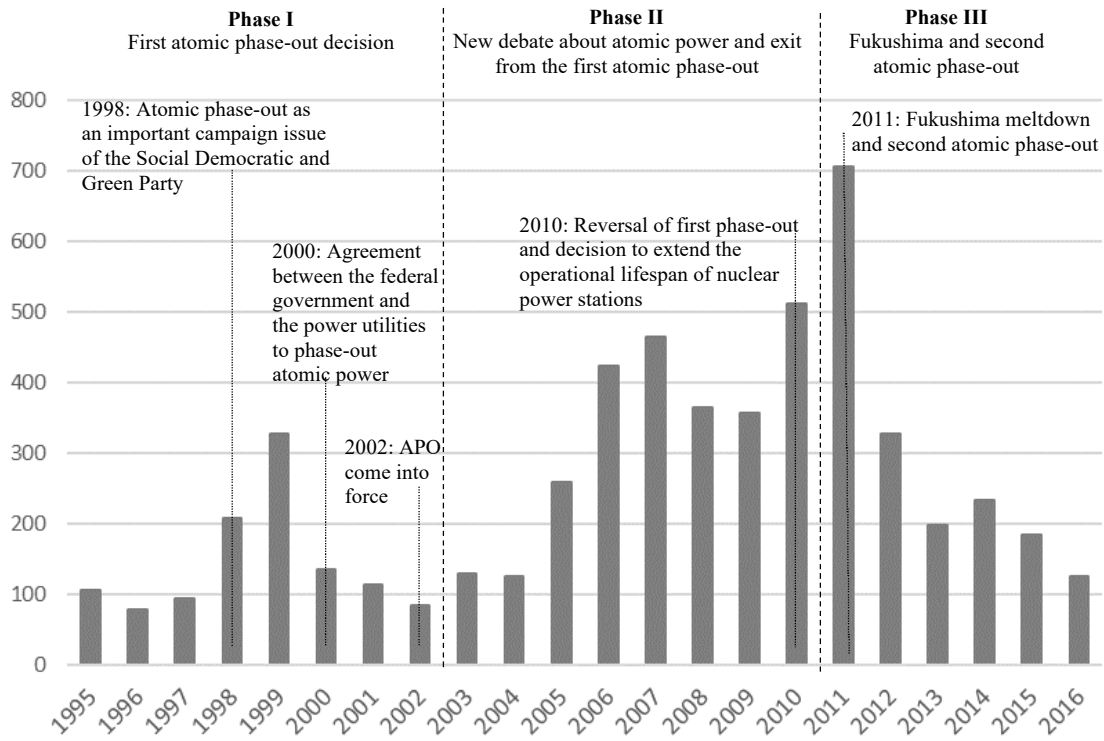
Figure 2. The security frame and its contrary use (media coverage in percent)