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Framing as modus operandi for social movements: The case of Black Lives Matter

Introduction

In the context of digitalization of society, social movements seek to thrust themselves to the fore in regard to public opinion. Although they have always been a subject of interest for researchers within the realm of political communication (Gitlin, 1980; Gamson, 1992; Gamson, Meyer, 1999), different aspects help us to comprehend their value today. New social movements originate due to a combination of factors that arise in many societies throughout the world: the use of strong identities, lack of representation of their interests through traditional forms of political participation, and the use of new technologies (Jove, 2010). Most new social movements present a decentralized structure, lack hierarchical leadership and are capable of integrating many different political initiatives and factions (Pérez-Latre, Jove, 2011). In this context, the digital media provide a perfect platform for strengthening identities, boosting participation, and facilitating worldwide connections (Kahn, Kellner, 2004).

Based on these premises, social movements require a series of symbolic contents that help to hold them together and mobilize participation, and framing has become an essential and strategic tool in this respect (Sádaba, 2004). We can observe ongoing development regarding the faculties that framing theory provides in terms of collective mobilization, enabling social groups to define social reality, and achieve their goals. Frames have become a mobilizing instrument, serving as a source of legitimization and coherent structures for social mobilization. Understanding their role and their development helps us to comprehend large-scale mobilizing phenomena such as Black Lives Matter, which was founded on digital mobilization and a certain framing approach. This movement effectively turned into a global phenomenon that transcended the usual limits of this kind of collective action.

In this respect, this article first outlines the origins of framing theory, going on to describing how this is directly linked to social movements within the current context.

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The case of the mobilization surrounding Black Lives Matter and its use of framing will serve to illustrate the points that have been made.

Framing theory

Influenced by Wittgenstein's analytical philosophy, Erving Goffman (1922-1982) published *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* in 1974, in which he explained that "definitions of a situation are built up in accordance with principles of organization which govern events – at least social ones – and our subjective involvement in them; frame is the word I use to refer to such of these basic elements as I am able to identify" (Goffman, 1986: 10).

This was how Goffman responded to the question raised by the interpretative sociology of William Isaac Thomas regarding how individuals "define situations". Within this branch of sociology, individuals, before taking action, classify the situation they are faced with by considering their attitudes and prior knowledge. In this respect, "not only concrete acts are dependent on the definition of the situation, but gradually a whole life policy and the personality of the individual himself would follow from a series of such definitions" (Thomas, 1972: 331). Thus, Goffman explains that the question "What's going on?" is answered with a "frame" that makes sense of events and which provides the basis for possible reorganization and "reframing". In his concept of frame, the author brought together two concepts that would determine future research regarding framing theory: framework, which relates to the social aspects of shared meanings, and schema, which refers to structures of mental organization. The organization of experiences, thus, involves both social frameworks and mental schemas, which are both brought together in frames (Thomas, 1972: 331).

Based on these contributions, framing theory effectively took off and has subsequently become one of the most popular theoretical and operative approaches in regard to media research in recent decades. In spite of its somewhat chaotic development and its multiple versions (Sádaba, Rodríguez, Bartolomé, 2012), framing has provided a focal point for cognitive explanations of the communication media and, above all, for studies regarding the media's effects on public opinion, in which we also come across the not-entirely-clear connections within the academic realm between framing theories and agenda setting (McCombs, Shaw, 1993; Scheufele, Tewksbury, 2007).

Although Gaye Tuchman would be the one who took up Goffman's baton and the legacy of interpretative sociology in *Making News* (1978), applying it to the work of the media, it was Robert Entman who drafted a more precise definition in this field. Tuchman talks about how situations are defined when news is created, considering the entire informative process, using the metaphoric idea of news as a window through which we can see events unfold:

News is a window on the world [...]. But the view through a window depends on whether the window is large or small, whether the glass is opaque or clear, whether the window faces a street or a backyard. The unfolding scene also depends on where one stands, far or near, craning one's neck to the side or gazing straight ahead, eyes parallel to the wall in which the window is encased (Tuchman, 1978: 1).

In this sense, frames help to give shape to events, which means they can be shared socially. In these frames, journalistic norms and complex workings of editorial departments have a definitive impact when it comes to organizing the reality in which news is created. The sociology of editorial environments, thus, becomes the context in which different definitions emerge regarding what is happening 'out there'.

Years later, providing one of the definitions of framing most frequently quoted by researchers, Entman wrote the following: "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman, 1993: 52). Entman describes framing as the selection that is made by the media, one that considers the sender, the receiver, the journalistic text and the culture in which the message appears. According to Entman, journalists decide what to communicate, guided by their own knowledge schemas; texts contain frames that reveal the absence or presence of certain keywords, sources of information, and images; the receivers also have their own knowledge schemas, which may coincide or not with those of the journalists and the texts; and, finally, culture is like a warehouse of the frames that are commonly invoked. In this respect, we are dealing with shared schemas that underpin the attitudes of journalists and that organize the information; amongst the receivers, schemas mean that the latter are capable of understanding the information; and these schemas are hidden in the texts and in the culture in which they are generated.

Without overlooking other factors, Entman declared that "the more congruent the frame with schemas that dominate the political culture, the more success it will enjoy" (Entman, 2003: 422). In this sense, the most powerful frames, Entman goes on to explain, must be congruent with the cultural schemas with which members of society normally function.

Based on this cultural approach, the researcher goes one step further and explains that the selection formerly attributed to the media can also be made by politicians (Entman, 2003). In fact, politicians very often make the selection before or at the same time as journalists. His cascading activation model reveals precisely this: it consists of a vision of the frames contributed by different political communication actors and how these are progressively accepted or rejected (although the latter is more difficult). According to Entman, the first link in his cascade is political power, represented in his case by the White House, where the author explains the Administration's capacity to insert frames. Then would come other political élites, and then the media, and then the pub-

lic. Although the public has an important role in terms of influencing future frames, its actions are less strategic.

Thus, it is not only journalists, but also the different political realms that compete in this selection. The author proposes his own redefinition of the concept of framing: "We can define framing as the process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation" (Entman, 2007: 164).

The connections highlighted in this vision of framing have often been considered to constitute a more ideological approach or been confused with such an approach (Reese, 1999), to the extent that the interests behind these interpretations and selections of events are emphasized in order to suggest that they are the ones who define what is happening.

Framing in social movements

Social Movement Organizations (SMOs), which are characterized as collective action groups that have political goals, have witnessed considerable development in recent years. Based on shared causes such as civil rights, feminism, and environmentalism, they are characterized by collective action over a period of time, which is organized in a more or less structured manner, in which the members are connected by a shared interest and are mobilized by specific strategies.

Interest in social mobilization studies relating to framing has increased over the last few decades (Benford, Snow, 2000) and presents, in the same way as with communication studies, a wide and dispersed range of perspectives. The study of framing in SMOs contemplates certain specific questions that are of particular interest when it comes to clarifying the connections between framing analysis and an analysis of SMOs. By considering the contributions that framing makes to the work of SMOs, we can also gain an insight into their practical dimension in terms of collective action.

On the one hand, we have the perspective of SMOs as producers of frames: if movements are considered to be agencies for collective meaning that have a capacity to disseminate ideas within society, linked to the culture in which they exist, then one of their tasks is to produce frames for political alignment (Benford, Snow, 2000) in order to achieve the mobilization that is desired. On the other hand, framing theory at SMOs can be contemplated based on the legitimization processes that take place at these organizations, which are facilitated by the frames produced by the media. Finally, and thanks to the new opportunities provided by the social media, the capacity to endow SMOs with credibility by means of strategic frames is essential in terms of maintaining collective action.

In this respect, we could state that framing provides a possible threefold perspective of SMOs: mobilization, legitimization and congruence. We shall analyze each of these aspects in greater detail below.

Frames and collective mobilization

In the 1990s, the study of structural dimensions at SMOs (economic, class-related) incorporated other more interpretative and perceptual questions based on an interest in framing:

> […] mobilization not only requires that the structural conditions be ripe for collective action to occur, it also requires that a critical mass of persons collectively define the situation as ripe and persuade others on an ongoing basis that their version of reality rings true. This reality construction process entails, among other things, the employment of framing activity and the development of vocabularies of movement motives (Benford, 1993: 199).

In this respect, Goffman's proposal was enthusiastically taken up by the SMO theorists, who regarded the creation of collective meanings as an opportunity to attract supporters to collective movements. The capacity of SMOs to create strategic frames in order to integrate their members was considered to be a key aspect. In this sense, "the interpretations and symbols employed in order to express themselves become the tactical and conscious tools of activists" (Sádaba, 2008: 40).

According to Snow and his colleagues, frames only work if they are able to align the interpretative versions of SMOs with those of individuals (Snow, Burke, Worden, Benford, 1986). Frame alignment takes place in four different ways: frame bridging, frame amplification, frame extension and frame transformation (Snow, , Burke, Worden, Benford, 1986).

Frame bridging creates a bond between individuals who share certain characteristics but do not have an organizational basis with which to express their needs, in which respect it unifies individual and organizational levels. Frame amplification refers to the alignment of the values and beliefs of individuals with the values and beliefs of the movement. Frame extension occurs when the movement is required to extend its interests whilst remaining congruent in regard to its potential sympathizers. These interests may not directly concern the movement, but serve to attract members and mobilize individuals, such as, for example, organizing a concert in order to raise money and encourage people to join a cause. Finally, frame transformation entails the possibility of abandoning frames that are no longer used and creating new ones. The identification needs of the members of the movement are thus supported by the frames that help to build this alignment.

Various authors have systemized the use of framing in the case of SMOs, breaking it down into three aspects that must make up all and any frame: diagnosis, which is used to identify the problem, attributing blame or a certain cause regarding the problem; prognosis, which identifies a solution, strategies, tactics and targets; and motivation, which mobilizes participation.

In many studies, the diagnosis has focused on victimization or injustice, which generate the need for mobilization. However, as some authors have pointed out (Benford,

Snow, 2000), other possibilities exist under this heading, such as attribution of responsibilities (as was clearly illustrated in the case of the 11-M events in Spain [Sádaba, 2008: 207]). In regard to prognosis, framing helps to define the proposed solutions and, consequently, this is where differences exist between one social movement and another. Finally, in relation to motivation, frames provide a vocabulary that effectively mobilizes participation. Symbols acquire a special importance within this vocabulary, in the sense that, since they have a shared significance, they help to boost mobilization: "Within the specific vision that each movement maintains regarding the problem in question, collective action requires a series of perceptions that appear to be shared, which is why symbols are a good means of unifying meanings and interests" (Sádaba, 2008: 41).

Frames and SMO legitimization

For SMOs, it is as important to create their own particular definitions of social reality as it is to disseminate them in order to reach public opinion. That is why it is essential for them to occupy a place on the media agenda, so that they can take part in the public discourse. The very *raison d'être* of SMOs resides in their goals being considered publicly, in which respect they need to be legitimized by the media.

That is why, for collective action theorists, the media appear as the main promoters of alignment processes, based on their all-powerful capacity to reach members of society. It was Todd Gitlin who began to explain the role of framing in the media and the latter's dominion in regard to public opinion. In Gitlin's view, the communication media effectively manage the public discourse and the consciences of members of society by using frames (Gitlin, 1980).

Other authors such as William Gamson qualify this absolute power attributed to the media in relation to collective action (Gamson, 1992). According to Gamson, in addition to the media, society has other sources of knowledge, such as the members' own experience and popular wisdom (a kind of cultural common-sense). What is more, through the integration of these three sources of meaning, the effectiveness of frames is all the greater. In this respect, the media's frames are more effective to the extent in which they reverberate culturally and personally.

Furthermore, the author points out that the media's capacity to influence is not tantamount to social control in all cases. We cannot conclude that the actions of individuals are determined by the frames presented by the media. The vulnerability of individuals in regard to these frames will depend on their use of other sources of knowledge: the less they turn to other sources, the more they are exposed to the influence of the media. In this sense, Gamson's recommendation is to integrate all three sources so that frames can be accepted in a natural manner by the public.

Although he recognizes that the media have become the most important source of information for members of society, especially in cases in which they have no direct

personal experience, it is important to highlight the fact that the media do not always present the same frames as SMOs. The media may delegitimize a movement and trivialize it: thus, a demonstration can be depicted in a newspaper as a veritable spectacle or as a minority event. That is why it is fundamental for the frames promoted by movements to be consistent with those of the media. This occurred, for example, in the case of the mobilizations organized after the kidnapping and murder of Miguel Ángel Blanco, when both anti-terrorist frames coincided (Sádaba, 2004) or in the case of the 15M encampment in Puerta del Sol, when frames were aligned regarding Spaniards' growing distrust of political parties and politics.

In this respect, the media not only help SMOs to disseminate their demands and strategies and to gain new members, but they also, and above all, help to legitimize or delegitimize their causes and action proposals depending on whether they adopt one frame or another. This occurs both during the genesis of the movement and throughout the movement's entire public existence.

Frames and the credibility of SMOs

The emergence of social media and what is known as cyber-activism has given rise to a different communicative environment in which, once again, framing raises a series of important questions for SMOs.

Since the protests that took place during what became known as the Arab Spring, the power of the social media in favor of collective action has grown, as has its interest in terms of analysis. There is little doubt that the Internet and the social media have reconfigured the arena of public opinion and have changed the role that the traditional actors played within it. In the case of collective action, the transformation has been even more significant, given that we can state that both SMOs and the social media work at the same level: citizen participation. In this respect, SMOs have discovered a natural ally in the social media for their mobilization strategies, for attracting new members and in terms of their need to establish criteria for the public debate**.**

Thus, studies have been done of the different frames employed as a grassroots technique in order to involve donors and volunteers in a movement through e-mailing (Weberling, 2012), as a mechanism for locating and concentrating users (Roldán, 2016), and as a means of generating collective action in cases such as that of the Chevron protesters in Romania and their use of Facebook (Cmeciu, Coman, 2016). Furthermore, the classic theories and functions of frames described above (diagnosis, prognosis, motivation, and alignment) have been applied to the use of social media by movements such as the Million Hoodies (Hon, 2016), the forerunner of the current Black Lives Matter movement. Framing processes within this context become more complex and less linear, given that the multiplicity of frames can rather confuse the picture more than promote collective action.

What is more, the incapacity of the media in recent years to achieve the degree of influence it enjoyed before (Bennet, Iyengar, 2008), has meant that the legitimizing function has been transferred to the social media. If before it was a question of entering the mass public debate through the media, now with the social media it is more important to be a source of credibility, especially when the media's credibility has diminished or the media have been delegitimized (Surzhko-Harned, Zahuranec, 2017).

The credibility of frames at SMOs is based on three aspects: the internal consistency of the frame in regard to the cause being defended, empirical credibility, and the credibility of the promotors. In the social media world, where a greater degree of transparency and participation is possible, these three variables are reaffirmed in the case of collective action. In this respect, the social media also connect with one of the essential principles of framing described above, namely the need for congruence or reverberation between what has been experienced and what is socially demanded by SMOs.

In regard to congruence, framing has various functions in the social media for collective action. Some of them could be described as follows: credibility helps to sustain the movement and facilitates the celebration of victories (Einwohner, 2002); credibility contributes to the perception of a sense of belonging and participation, even when this only takes place online; credibility definitively promotes the amplification of the SMO. Whatever the case may be, credibility plays its part within a context of more segmented interests and more cohesive public niches, where the mechanisms of selective exposure are strengthened.

Case study: Black Lives Matter

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement began in 2013, after the manslaughter of black teenager, Trayvon Martin, aged 17, at the hands of police officer, George Zimmerman, in Florida, USA. BLM began as a hashtag on Twitter that was popularized by three women: Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi. For some time, they had wanted to draw attention to the inequalities suffered by Afro-Americans in the USA through a website called *HerStory*. Garza posted a love note to black people on her Facebook page that ended with "Black people, I love you. I love us. Our lives matter," and then Cullors reposted it with the hashtag #blacklivesmatter .

In 2014, following the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, the movement re-emerged, but it was above all in 2018 and 2020, with the deaths of Stephon Clark, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd that the BLM movement acquired its large-scale dimension and international character. "In the years since this viral post, #BlackLivesMatter has been tweeted more than 35 million times, making it one of the three most used hashtags on the Twitter platform" (Bonilla, Tillery, 2020: 947). This hashtag has been complemented with various alternatives, such as #AllLivesMatter or #BlueLivesMatter, when the BLM movement has become involved in controversial instances of street violence.

Type of movement

Bonilla and Tillery explain that "[t]he consensus within the literature is that the BLM movement is akin to the New Social Movements (NSM), such as Germany's antinuclear movement or the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States" (Bonilla, Tillery, 2020: 947).

The NSM (Ger. *Neue Soziale Bewegungen*) initiated a new development in West German society that attracted the attention of political observers. Their roots can be traced back to the expansion of civic action groups (*Bürgerinitiativen*) in the 1970s, the emergence of coordinating organizations at a national level such as the BBU (*Bundesverband Bürgerinitiativen Umweltschutz*) and, finally, the construction of the Green Party (Reinares, 1994).

Up until this point, the predominant explanation for social movements had been resource mobilization theory. It was the predominant trend in the United States and stated that movements were the inevitable product of the expansion of political opportunities, contradictions or an increase in resources. Consequently, this approach focused on the aspects that 'rationally' promoted the development of a movement, such as its organization, in which membership of a movement consisted of a unilateral individual decision weighed in terms of cost and benefit. The main representative of this rationalist approach was Mancur Olson. This theory of rational choice has been criticized because it fails to take into account the uncertainty entailed by any kind of action, because it postulates that individuals take part in movements for utilitarian purposes, due to its proportionalism in terms of what is good, and because it reduces rationality to the private sphere. It takes for granted, therefore, that an inherent interest exists in the social structure that is shared and that attitudes precede action, which means that little effort is required to incite the public to join a movement, given that the individual has a prior disposition.

The NSM, thus, criticize resource mobilization theory due to its narrow concept of rationality, limiting all references to self-interest and, above all, because it pays little heed to the ideas and identities required to generate social mobilization. In NSM studies, these identities constitute the main characteristic that defines movements. In this respect, the realm addressed by these theorists focuses on the cultural and ideological aspects that underpin the effectiveness of a movement: cultural climates, collective beliefs and social frameworks that make change possible.

These two schools of thought converged in the 1990s into an integrated approach that assumed that structural dimensions (economic, social class) would have to be completed by other subjective dimensions, such as individual perceptions and the social construction of meaning. This revived an interest in interpretative questions and the problem of meaning.

From this perspective, mobilization not only requires that the structural conditions be ripe for collective action to occur, it also requires that a critical mass of persons collectively define the

situation as ripe and persuade others on an ongoing basis that their version of reality rings true. This reality construction process entails, among other things, the employment of framing activity and the development of vocabularies of movement motives (Benford, 1993).

This is why the BLM movement is more concern in the identity issues than in focusing the organization on the mobilizing resources for any public influence.

In other words, we should observe Black Lives Matter activists devoting considerable attention to messaging about the various identity groups that they purport to represent in the public sphere. According to Fernando Orejuela and Stephanie Shonekan, "the Black Lives Matter movement is not the civil rights movement. It is something else. It is a motivating, dynamic movement still developing in the second millennium, mobilizing similar programs, organizations, and interested allies protesting racial injustice today to work together" (Orejuela, Shonekan, 2018: 7). For this reason, framing in BLM is a strategic tool to consider.

Framing BLM

The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter sought to highlight racial inequality and police brutality. However, the intention of the creators and promoters of the movement was somewhat different. Their idea was to talk about inclusiveness: the integration of women in black liberation movements and, according to the BLM website, the movement was "unapologetically black," "transgender affirming," "queer affirming" and "intergenerational." In the founders' view, as set out on their web site, the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter was coined as an "affirmation of black folks' contributions to society, humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression". The movement was intentionally intersectional and focused on human rights.

The idea of BLM was, from the very beginning, to create a movement: "This is not a moment, but a movement", is one of the tenets of the promoters' philosophy. It's not just a question of responding to specific events, but of highlighting structural issues of violence against Black Americans. "BLM frames its actions through a critical feminist perspective to reinvent progressive tactics for social change" (Clark, Dantzler, Nickels, 2018: 147).

In addition to police violence, BLM has been spotlighting other issues that affect quality of life in the black community, such as high incarceration rates, undocumented immigrants, and black poverty. Clark, Dantzler and Nickels declare that any reduction of the movement's frame has been brought about by the media: "Despite media linkages of BLM solely to issues of police brutality, BLM has crafted its image and message to embrace all Black lives and all topics relevant to the Black experience, transforming the dominant frames from past movements" (Clark, Dantzler, Nickels, 2018: 147).

Actually, it could be said that in terms of Frame bridging, BLM is creating a new structure that is not about inclusion in society (as it was the case of the Civil Rights

Movement), but about control and prominence in society. However, the media: "[b]y constantly comparing BLM to Martin Luther King Jr.'s Civil Rights movement, the news media can delegitimize the actions undertaken by BLM, because they do not emulate Dr King's 'peaceful protests'" (Banks, 2018). Regarding frame amplification BLM in his proposal embraces other values and beliefs not always explained as "black issues", such as inequality or exclusion.

Moreover, BLM represents a good example of frame transformation, as the movement is abandoning old black frames and creating new ones. Again, the role of the media seems to be relevant in the framing process as "two stories using the riot journalistic frame could bring different advocacy frames, focusing on either police militarization or institutionalized racism, for example" (Mourão, Kilgo, Sylvie, 2021: 3).

Finally, it is interesting to state that in the amplification and legitimization process, BLM stands as one of the first social movements in which brands and celebrities have used their platforms to speak up against racism (Ambás, Sádaba, 2021). In 2020, celebrities and athletes supported the movement by wearing T-shirts with powerful statements such as "I Can't Breathe," as worn by basketball player Lebron James, "BLM" sported by actor Sterling K. Brown, and "Arrest the Cops Who Killed Breonna Taylor," used by racing driver Lewis Hamilton.

In 2020, when George Floyd's protest started in Minneapolis, Nike released a commercial that urged its consumers to stop racist attitudes with the phrase: "For Once, Don't Do It.", and Rebook posted on its Instagram account: "Without the black community, Reebok would not exist. America would not exist. We are not asking you to buy our shoes. We are asking you to stand in someone else's ". Many other brands give support to BLM in their social media and made generous contributions to foundations linked to the movement.

In terms of the framing strategy, this involvement of other social actors was very significant in the achievement of notoriety and awareness of BLM. However, the idea of a movement against blacks and policy brutality was more relevant than other messages that the movement wanted to spread. Consistency and credibility of the movement could be affected under this perspective.

Conclusions

Framing activity is more and more important for social movements, as the idea of identity and signification is at the core of many new movements. BLM is an example of this new way to approach social demands. However, it could be said that a frame purpose needs to be aligned with a media frame strategy, as legitimization and credibility are key in the new social and media environment.

Also, we should warm about the reductionism created in the social media, when a movement can reach a lot of notoriety, even worldwide, but the loss of signification

and therefore, differentiation is also very common. This does not mean that the use of hashtags or simple claims should be reduced, but at least, integrated in the framing strategy. Collective action nowadays needs to have a clear understanding of the communication side of any movement, and framing developments can help to reinforce ideas and meanings in the society.

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Abstract: From a symbolic and cultural approach to the social movements, framing theory has contributed to explain meanings and strategies for mobilization. Also, the theory has evolved in the media research, and media frames have to be also considered in the collective action. This paper clarifies how frames work in this context and describes their ability to give legitimization and congruence to the movement. The case of Black Lives Matter is an example of the use of framing and its consequences for the movement.