Frames That Matter: How Institutional Discourse Shapes Collective Understanding Of Crisis

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the strategic role of framing in institutional discourse, focusing on how different actors linguistically construct meaning around high-stakes events. Grounded in the theoretical foundations of Goffman's frame analysis and Entman's four-function model, the study highlights how framing operates as both a cognitive shortcut and an ideological instrument. Far from being neutral, frames serve as mechanisms of power, selectively shaping public perception, moral judgment, and institutional credibility. Drawing from three distinct sources: the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, and BP's official report, the analysis reveals how governmental, scientific, and corporate voices mobilize different framing devices. The EPA emphasizes state-led accountability through responsibility and oversight frames; the Smithsonian evokes ecological urgency and moral reflection through environmental devastation framing; while BP employs corporate apologia and complexity framing to deflect blame and depersonalize responsibility. Through comparative framing analysis, the article demonstrates how these discourses not only reflect distinct communicative aims but also engage in symbolic contestation over narrative ownership. Ultimately, the study affirms that framing is not merely about structuring information, but about establishing authority, shaping collective memory, and influencing how crises are publicly understood, morally evaluated, and historically remembered.

Keywords: framing theory; institutional discourse; media framing; crisis communication; collective memory; image repair theory; discourse analysis; public perception; narrative construction; semantic frames; cognitive linguistics

Introduction

Framing, as a linguistic and cognitive phenomenon, plays a central role in shaping how individuals and communities interpret complex events. Originating in sociological theory, frame analysis was first systematically developed by Erving Goffman, who approached human interaction inductively, formulating patterns that account for behaviors observed across diverse social contexts. As Goffman notes, frame analysis is concerned with "accounting for human behavior in the terminology and epistemology of those concepts" [3; p. 2], which are derived from recurring social practices. These analytical "frames" are understood as structures of meaning that guide interpretation by organizing experience in ways that are culturally recognizable and interactionally relevant. As defined by R. Entman, "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" [6; p. 52]. This four-function model has become foundational in understanding how language shapes perception, attribution, and judgment in the public sphere.

Framing theory offers an indispensable tool in the study of institutional discourse, particularly during times of crisis when narratives are contested and public meaning is actively constructed. Within the field of linguistics and media communication, framing refers to the linguistic and semiotic mechanisms through which information is organized, emphasized, and interpreted. Rather than presenting facts neutrally, communicators select and structure content in a way that renders certain interpretations more accessible than others. This discursive act of selection is ideologically and rhetorically charged, particularly in institutional contexts where the stakes of perception are high.

Main part

At the heart of framing theory lies the notion that linguistic choices are neither arbitrary nor benign, rather, they guide audiences' understanding by establishing dominant definitions of the situation. This involves highlighting particular causes, assigning blame or credit, evaluating moral responsibility, and suggesting specific remedies or courses of action. From a cognitive-linguistic perspective, framing functions as a schema-activating device that simplifies complex realities into manageable narratives. Indeed, the focus of news framing, as widely acknowledged, is to "establish cognitive shortcuts" for audiences. However, such shortcuts often come at a cost of oversimplifying news; distracting public from important issues; limiting the ability of audience to think outside the box; activation of magic bullet effect of cognitively shaped audience [1; p. 4]. In doing so, they risk activating a kind of 'magic bullet' effect, shaping public thought with minimal resistance or reflection.

A range of framing typologies has been identified in discourse analysis. These include the responsibility frame, which attributes cause or solution to particular actors, the human-interest frame, which introduces personal or emotional angles, the conflict frame, emphasizing tensions or disagreements, and the economic frame, focusing on financial outcomes. In the context of environmental and technical crises, environmental devastation, technical complexity, and restorative optimism frames are particularly salient. Scholars distinguish between issue-specific frames, those tied to particular events or contexts, and generic frames that recur across different topics, cultures, and time periods [5; p. 54]. Furthermore, theoretical developments suggest that framing can be understood at multiple levels: as semantic frames, which describe the conceptual roles tied to linguistic forms; as cognitive frames, which represent background knowledge and schemas necessary for meaning-making; and as communicative frames, where such knowledge is instantiated through language, media, or visual modes and thereby activated in others' cognition [9; p. 6]. The strategic deployment of these frames across media and institutional platforms reveals the ideological investments and communicative goals of different actors.

Building upon the typology of frames discussed above, the study applies framing theory to the institutional discourse surrounding the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. In April 2010, a blowout on BP's Deepwater Horizon rig in the Gulf of Mexico caused a massive oil release, resulting in environmental damage, legal repercussions, and wide public scrutiny. While the facts of the disaster are well documented, what remains analytically valuable is how various institutions constructed meaning around the event through discourse.

To examine these constructions, the study focuses on three institutional sources: the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), BP's official report, and APNews coverage. These sources represent governmental, corporate, and journalistic perspectives, respectively, each with distinct communicative aims and audiences. Their selection allows for

comparative insight into how framing devices are strategically deployed to attribute responsibility, evoke empathy, or deflect blame. The methodological approach is grounded in qualitative framing analysis. The analysis is organized through source-specific framing tables, allowing for a nuanced, contextualized examination of each institution's discourse. This structure enables a clearer tracing of rhetorical strategies and ideological positioning across governmental - EPA, corporate - BP, and media – APNews actors, providing insight into how framing choices shape public perception during high-profile environmental crises.

Table № 1

Framing analysis of the EPA's discourse on the Deepwater horizon oil spill

Source	Framing Type	Example
United States Environmental Protection Agency	Responsibility frame and government oversight frame	1. *"EPA and other federal agencies led efforts to contain and clean up the spill."* 2. *"EPA and DOJ reached a historic $20.8 billion settlement with BP and its partners."* 3. *"EPA conducted air, water, sediment, and waste sampling...to assess immediate and long-term risks."* 4. *"The United States filed a civil complaint...for violations of the Clean Water Act."*

According to Entman's framing theory, "every news text has a frame with four components: diagnosing problems, diagnosing causes, making a moral evaluation, and recommending treatments" [4; p.1]. These examples construct a government-led responsibility narrative that frames the U.S. government not only as a responder but as an enforcer of justice and protector of the environment. This text emphasizes two key framing functions: (1) Causal interpretation - BP violated the Clean Water Act, and (2) Treatment recommendation - EPA took legal, financial, and scientific action. The phrase "*led efforts*" highlights federal initiative; "*filed a civil complaint*" suggests prosecutorial authority; "*historic settlement*" evokes moral and legal resolution. Importantly, EPA's active monitoring efforts: sampling, enforcement, public transparency, also support a technocratic legitimacy frame - the government as competent, science-driven, and in control. Meanwhile, BP's role is minimized, mentioned mostly in the context of being held accountable, rather than taking initiative. This asymmetry reinforces the frame that restoration is driven by the state, not the corporation.

Table № 2

Framing analysis of the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History's discourse on the Deepwater horizon oil spill

Source	Framing Type	Example
Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History	Environmental devastation frame	1. *"The spill affected over 1,300 miles of coastline and caused extensive damage to marine life, habitats, and the local fishing industry."* 2. *"Hundreds of dead sea turtles,*

		countless dolphins stranded and dying…" 3. *"Deep corals in the Gulf have shown signs of tissue damage and slower growth."* 4. *"Oil has settled on the seafloor and continues to affect marine ecosystems years later."*

As Neuman states, news frames are "conceptual tools which media and individuals rely on to convey, interpret and evaluate information" [8; p. 60]. He identified four dominant types of news frames commonly used in media coverage: economic consequence, human impact, moral judgment, and conflict [7; p. 2]. This framing emphasizes the biological scale and temporal persistence of ecological damage. Following Entman's framing theory, it performs problem definition, the Gulf as an ongoing ecological crisis, causal diagnosis: oil contamination, and moral evaluation, impacts on innocent species and fragile ecosystems. The repeated use of large-scale numerical data: "*1,300 miles*," "*hundreds*," "*countless*," enhances salience and credibility. The references to "tissue damage," "slower growth," and "continued effects" support what is described as a scientific alarmist framing, while emotionally loaded imagery - "dying dolphins" mobilizes affective responses from readers. These linguistic and narrative choices create a sense of irreversible loss and position the environment not just as a victim, but as a long-term casualty in need of advocacy and restoration.

Table № 3

Framing analysis of the BP's discourse on the Deepwater horizon oil spill

Source	Framing Type	Example
BP Official Report	Corporate apologia and complexity frame	1. *"A complex and interlinked series of mechanical failures, human judgments, engineering design, operational implementation, and team interfaces contributed to the accident."* 2. *"Multiple companies, including BP, Halliburton and Transocean, were involved in the operations on the Macondo well."* 3. *"It is evident that a series of complex failures involving a number of different parties led to the accident."*

This text exemplifies corporate apologia framing**,** specifically the differentiation and minimization strategies outlined in Benoit's Image Repair Theory**.** The phrase *"complex and interlinked"* shifts the frame away from individual fault and toward systemic ambiguity, thereby diluting direct accountability. By stating that *"multiple companies…were involved,"* the report distributes blame across entities. The technical register: *"engineering design," "team*

interfaces," "operational implementation" further obscures culpability through jargon, reframing the crisis as the unintended byproduct of routine industrial practice. Additionally, the report avoids emotional language or acknowledgment of victims, reinforcing a strategic depersonalization that steers attention away from moral liability and toward *neutral systemic failure*. This framing aligns with a complexity discourse that reinterprets ethical disaster as logistical malfunction, thereby insulating corporate image while appearing factually transparent.

Conclusion

The comparative framing analysis of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill across governmental, scientific, and corporate discourses reveals the powerful role of framing in shaping public memory and institutional credibility during crises. Drawing on Entman's foundational framing model, which emphasizes problem definition, causal attribution, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation, and the study demonstrates how each actor constructed a distinct narrative of the same event, selectively highlighting certain aspects while omitting others.

Table 1 shows that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) employed a responsibility frame and a government oversight frame, positioning the state as both a reactive and proactive force. Through the provided above examples, the EPA framed itself as a scientific and moral authority capable of managing environmental crises and enforcing legal accountability. This framing not only reinforces the legitimacy of state intervention but also inscribes a lasting institutional memory that centers the government as the key agent of restoration and justice.

In contrast, Table 2 illustrates how the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History adopted an environmental devastation frame, drawing on Neuman (1992) four common media frame, particularly the human impact and moral judgment dimensions. By invoking emotionally potent alongside large-scale metrics, this discourse invites public empathy and moral outrage. It positions the environment as an innocent victim of industrial carelessness, prompting a call to collective memory that centers loss, fragility, and the need for long-term ecological advocacy.

Table 3 reveals that BP's official communication followed a corporate apologia strategy, heavily shaped by Benoit's Image Repair Theory. According to Benoit, image restoration becomes necessary when an entity is accused of wrongdoing, specifically when (1) the accused is held responsible for an action, and (2) that action is perceived as offensive [2; p. 10]. In BP's case, these conditions were clearly met, prompting a rhetorical response aimed at preserving reputation. Through differentiation and complexity framing, BP deflects direct blame by emphasizing systemic failures, shared responsibility, and technical nuance. Phrases like "a complex and interlinked series" and "multiple companies…were involved" dilute accountability, subtly shifting the crisis from a moral failure to a technical mishap. This strategy serves to protect corporate legitimacy while avoiding emotional engagement, ultimately reframing the disaster as a structural anomaly rather than a preventable ethical breach.

Thereby, these findings highlight that framing is not merely a representational device, but a powerful mechanism of influence, capable of shaping public attention, guiding interpretation, and constructing the boundaries of institutional credibility. Far from being a neutral or objective lens, framing determines which aspects of reality are made visible and which are concealed, which voices are amplified and which are marginalized. It operates at the intersection of language, power, and ideology, subtly guiding how events are perceived, evaluated, and remembered. In this sense, framing is not just about communication, it is about control, control over narratives, meanings, and ultimately, the perceived legitimacy of those who speak. Competing frames do not simply coexist as alternative descriptions of the same phenomenon; they actively struggle for dominance in shaping public consciousness and historical understanding. When different actors construct competing versions of the same event or issue, each emphasizing particular causes,

consequences, and moral evaluations, they are engaging in a form of discursive contestation. These frames serve strategic purposes: to assert authority, to shift blame, to build solidarity, or to deflect criticism. Whether it is a state institution asserting responsibility and leadership, a scientific body highlighting irreversible harm and urgency, or a corporate entity emphasizing systemic complexity and ambiguity, each framing decision carries consequences for how the public understands accountability, urgency, and resolution.

Ultimately, the deeper significance of framing lies in its capacity to shape collective memory and social response. Frames are not just about shaping momentary perception; they inscribe lasting interpretations into cultural and institutional narratives. What is framed as a preventable failure today may become a symbol of reform tomorrow, or, if framed effectively by powerful actors, may fade into abstraction altogether. Thus, framing is not only a tool of media and discourse but a deeply political act that defines the moral and cognitive terms on which society interprets and responds to complex realities.

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Corpus Material

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