Mass Media*

William A. Gamson

In every country, there is some form of public communication about topics and actors related either to some particular policy domain or to the broader interest and values that are engaged. This communication includes not only information, argumentation, and justifications but also images, metaphors, and other condensing symbols.

This communication—or to use social science jargon, “public discourse”—is carried out in various forums. One can think of a forum as having several parts to it. There is an “arena” in which individual or collective actors engage in public speech acts; an active audience or “gallery” observing what is going on and sometimes getting into the act; and a backstage, where the would-be players in the arena work out their ideas and strategize over how they will be presented, make alliances with like-minded others, and do the everyday work of cultural production.

There are many different forums in which this public discourse takes place—mass media, parliaments, courts, party conventions, scientific congresses, encyclopedias, coffee shops, and the like. In the current era in most countries, there is one forum that overshadows all the others, making them sideshows. For various reasons, general-audience mass media provide a master forum. The participants in all of the other forums use the mass media as well, either as players or as part of the gallery. The mass media gallery includes virtually everyone and hence everyone’s audience is hearing the messages there. Hence, they can’t afford to ignore the mass media forum, even if they want to speak to only a small segment of the larger gallery.

The technology of general audience media has changed dramatically in the past 25 years. Where once this meant print media and, later, radio and television, there are now various new media that attract a broad audience and a relatively undifferentiated gallery. Some popular blogs are not substantially different in their audience from some commercial television channels or newspapers. Furthermore, mass media organizations vary greatly in the breadth or the specialization of their galleries. Nevertheless, there remain important differences between new media and mass media besides their galleries and the distinction is worth keeping.

The mass media forum, of course, differs greatly from country to country. In some countries, the gatekeepers are professional journalists while in others they are agents of the government who exercise varying degrees of control over the content. While the independence of the gatekeepers is an important variable, those who are quoted in every mass media system tend to be overwhelmingly spokespersons for collective actors—government ministries, political parties, or organizations that claim to represent the interests or values of some constituency, speaking for or on behalf of them. Whether they actually reflect what these gallery members think is an empirical matter and cannot be assumed.

In those countries in which the mass media are completely instruments of government, lacking independence, they face an issue of credibility. The population is likely to be aware that they are receiving the official line and many members of the audience are likely to seek underground and alternative media, including the internet. Hence, the government is faced with the continuing challenge of suppressing an elusive set of competitors with greater credibility. In countries where this challenge is met incompletely—either because the government’s capacity for controlling the mass media is incomplete or emerging democratic norms create an ambivalent response—control of the mass media often becomes a major arena of conflict.

Where there is a significant degree of independence from officials, journalists play a dual role. By choosing to include quotations and paraphrases from some people and not others, journalists decide which collective actors should be taken seriously as important players. However, they are not merely gatekeepers in this process. They are themselves players who interpret and provide their own meaning when they choose to, operating within the constraints provided by accepted journalistic practice in their respective countries.

The metaphor of an arena is misleading if it suggests that the playing field is like the flat, orderly and well-marked field in a soccer stadium. The
field in which contests over meaning occur in the mass media is full of hills and valleys, sinkholes, and impenetrable jungles. To make matters even more complicated, the contours of the playing field can change suddenly in the middle of the contest because of events that lie beyond the control of the players. Finally, the players can themselves sometimes change the contours of the playing field through actions that create new discursive opportunities. The media playing field needs to be examined on a country by country and issue by issue basis because it provides advantages and disadvantages in an uneven way to the various participants.

The gallery is not just a bunch of individuals. Most of those watching the media carry around with them various collective identities—solidarity groups with whom they personally identify. Benedict Anderson (1991) captures the idea best with his concept of “imagined communities”. Examples would include women, workers, Christians, environmentalists, conservatives, Latinos, the “left”, and many others. Since people have multiple identities, they are potentially part of many imagined communities.

Imagined communities are not collective actors. They can only speak through some form of organization or advocacy network that attempts to generate, aggregate, transform, and articulate their concerns. These carriers attempt to represent and make claims on behalf of the interests and values of particular communities that become their constituencies. Often rival carriers compete for the same constituency offering different and even contradictory claims about the “real” interests of the general public or some more specific constituency such as women or Christians.

A small minority of the speakers in the arena are individuals speaking only for themselves but generally those quoted are spokespersons for collective actors. These speakers have the advantage of being able to prepare backstage with the help of an organized production center. Their organization may provide material resources, strategic analyses of the playing field and the opportunities and constraints it provides, professional know-how in the ways of the media, and useful alliances in the presentation of preferred frames in the arena. Speakers without such an organized production process behind them are severely handicapped against such competition.

### Measuring Success

One can measure success in any forum—including the mass media forum—by two variables: "standing" and "framing". Standing refers to having a voice. In news accounts, it refers to gaining the status of a regular media source whose interpretations are directly quoted. Standing is not the same as being covered or mentioned in the news; a group may be in the news in the sense that it is described or criticized but has no opportunity to provide interpretation and meaning to the events in which it is involved. Standing refers to a group being treated as an agent, not merely as an object being discussed by others.

Even if a participant gains standing, there is no guarantee that the media will use the particular quotes that the group would like. Success is also measured by the degree to which its preferred frames are prominently displayed relative to rival frames and how this relative prominence increases over time. A “frame” is a metaphor for a thought organizer.

There are three principal meanings of frame in the English language, the first two of which apply to our use here. The first, as in a picture frame, is a rim for encasing, holding, or bordering something, distinguishing it from what is around it. A frame, in this sense, specifies what is relevant and what should be ignored. A second meaning, as in a building frame, is a basic or skeletal structure, designed to give shape or support. The frame of a building, covered by walls and insulation, is invisible once construction is completed. Although we don’t actually see it, we can infer its presence in the finished product from its visible manifestations.

As a social science concept, both of these meanings are applicable. Issue frames call our attention to certain events and their underlying causes and consequences and direct our attention away from others. At the same time, they organize and make coherent an apparently diverse array of symbols, images, and arguments, linking them through an underlying organizing idea that suggests what is at stake on the issue. Framing deals with the gestalt or pattern-organizing aspect of meaning. A frame may imply a range of positions rather than any single one, allowing for a degree of controversy about what policies should be followed among those who share a common frame.

Although success in the mass media forum is important, it does not automatically convert into impact on public policy. Decision-makers in the