

**FRAMES IN REPORTS AND IN REPORTING:
HOW FRAMING AFFECTS GLOBAL WARMING
INFORMATION IN THE INTERGOVERNMENTAL
PANEL ON CLIMATE CHANGE’S “SUMMARY
FOR POLICYMAKERS” AND IN DOCUMENTS
WRITTEN ABOUT THE REPORT**

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ABSTRACT

Although much has been written about the use of rhetoric in technical communication, the framing of technical documents often is overlooked. Framing differs from rhetoric chiefly in that it involves the use of content selection and structure to place information in a particular context. In this article, I will analyze the techniques used to frame a technical report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s “Summary for Policymakers,” and compare them to the techniques used to frame corporate news releases and newspaper articles written about the report. This framing analysis shows that writers of technical documents, news releases, and news articles frame their documents chiefly by choosing which facts to include or exclude, and by the positioning of information within the document.

INTRODUCTION

Writers of technical reports make an effort to avoid the appearance of bias. In most cases, technical reports are written by a collaboration of scientists, engineers, and/or technical communicators—professionals who are expected to present the facts with minimal interpretation. However, technical writers and editors can and

do use textual and structural elements to frame the information in their reports—that is, they present the information in a certain context. Likewise, journalists, who are bound ethically to be impartial, nevertheless are able to frame news articles and remain within the boundaries of their ethical guidelines. The worlds of journalism and technical communication collide when journalists write news articles based in whole or in part on technical documents such as reports. A journalist writing a news article about a technical report must summarize and explain the information and recommendations in the document, and in order to do this, the journalist must frame the information somehow.

Because of the impact of framing on journalism ethics, scholars of journalism have studied the concept in depth. Many definitions of framing apply strictly to journalism, such as this one given by Boyle and others:

Framing involves several aspects of a story, including how it is structured, what information is included, and what tone is adopted. In general, framing is defined in terms of the organizing principles used to construct press accounts [1, p. 274].

Shannon defines framing in more general terms as “an organizing principle by which structure is applied to reality through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration” [2, p. 330].

Rather than define the concept of framing, Aday describes frames and provides an example:

In other words, a frame is a more encompassing concept than a micro-attribute, what McCombs and Ghanem, borrowing from Gamson and Goffinan, call the central organizing idea of an object or issue, one that includes a specific set of attributes. For example, a story about a presidential debate might employ the macro-level frame of “horse race” through the use of sports metaphors and a focus on the strategic advantages candidates gained or lost. At the same time, it might emphasize the micro-level attributes of the participants’ personalities rather than their qualifications. The framing literature leads us to take particular interest in frames as potentially powerful influences on audience attitudes because they provide a master narrative within which information contained in the story is understood by audiences [3, p. 767].

From this description, we see that although framing may involve the use of rhetorical devices such as metaphor, framing essentially is organization. Writers use rhetoric to persuade the reader; they use framing to present information in a particular context. In the example above, rhetoric could have been used to show readers one candidate in a favorable light, but instead framing casts all the candidates in the same light.

Because I will be discussing the framing of both press articles and technical documents in this article, I will use a broad working definition of framing as the inclusion or exclusion of content combined with the use of structural, style, and

design elements in order to provide a context for the information presented in a document. In this article, I will analyze the framing of a technical report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Then I will analyze news articles written about the report and corporate news releases responding to the report. This analysis will demonstrate how the same information can be framed differently in separate documents, coming from different sources, to advance an editorial or corporate agenda.

ETHICAL FRAMING

Technical communicators frame documents using techniques similar to those used by journalists, and they face similar ethical considerations. Technical communicators may be ethically obligated to frame information in a certain way, depending on the situation. Warning labels, for example, must include only the most important information and thus are framed by the inclusion and exclusion of information plus a clear, concise style. These framing elements are enhanced by design elements such as bold print or color to distinguish them from other text.

Like warning labels, risk assessments must be written and framed with the consideration that lives could be at stake. Grabill and Simmons suggest that technical communicators should frame risk assessments as an interactive process that creates consent among the various parties involved in the risk management process:

The meaning and value of risk in a given situation is a function of multiple and sometimes competing discourses. In this way, controversy about risk is reframed not as a problem or a negotiation between two parties (the risk maker and the audience) but as a complex web of stakeholders and positions that contribute to the meaning of risk in a given situation [4, p. 428].

According to Grabill and Simmons, reframing risk assessment as a collaborative process can diminish competition within an organization by flattening the organization's power structure. Grabill and Simmons see technical writers, particularly those involved in risk assessment, as having an ethical duty to do more than merely state facts about risk in order to encourage cooperation. "We have argued that technical communicators as user advocates can bring about more participatory and ethical decision making processes," they say in their conclusion [4, p. 436].

Journalists, like technical communicators, have an ethical duty to state facts accurately. Journalists also have an ethical duty to be unbiased. According to Article V of the *American Society of Newspaper Editors Statement of Principles*, "Sound practice [. . .] demands a clear distinction for the reader between news reports and opinion. Articles that contain opinion or personal interpretation should be clearly identified" [5].

This ethical obligation to state fact rather than opinion, however, does not prevent reporters and editors from framing news stories in such a way as to highlight certain facts or to encourage readers to take action. In fact, proponents of the movement known as public journalism argue that journalists have an obligation as citizens to “structure reporting around concern for the well-being of society” [6, p. 674]. Far from denouncing framing as a practice that distorts facts, Parisi says framing is an inevitable part of news writing:

Public journalism too moves from the idea that news writing does not directly mirror reality; it acknowledges that the facts must be framed somehow, and should be framed by asking systematically how social problems can be solved and by tracing opportunities and obstacles [6, p. 681].

METHODS

In this article, I will examine the framing of a technical report as well as documents from other sources—news releases and news articles—which were written about the report. I will seek to answer three questions. First, what techniques are used to frame each document? Second, how does this framing support other rhetorical devices used by the authors? Third, how does framing affect the information flow from the source document (the IPCC report) to the documents written about the report?

I will conduct this analysis by first observing how the report itself is framed, then by observing how the documents written about the report are framed. Of special note will be any occurrences of Kuypers’s four reportorial practices of sandwiching anti-position statements between pro-position statements, lopsided use of sources, labeling, and omission of alternate facts [7, pp. 193-194].

I will determine the effect of information flow in the intertextual chain by noting references to the report (in the form of direct and indirect quotations) and comments about the report. I will note references to other documents in the cohort, as well as any patterns that emerge in these intertextual chains, particularly if these patterns affect the framing of the documents or the flow of information from one document to the next.

As Solin points out, intertextual chain analysis can be useful in determining how a document is framed:

The strength of chain analysis is that it allows systematic microlevel description of phenomena taking place in textual interaction. [. . .] First, it illustrates the importance of genre in determining how claims from other domains are framed. It shows that claims do not travel in the public sphere intact, but that their mediation is accomplished through institutional filters [8, p. 288].

Intertextual chain analysis is one of many rhetorical aspects intertwined with framing analysis. Because many framing tools are also rhetorical tools, this framing analysis will resemble in some ways a rhetorical analysis. Of Aristotle’s

five canons of rhetoric, three—arrangement, style, and delivery—directly affect framing. But I am concerned with these—and with the use of logos, ethos, or pathos—only as they relate to the structure and style elements that help frame the document.

Because I will first examine the framing of a scientific document, I will briefly discuss the rhetoric of science, which Harris defines as “the study of suasion in the interpretation of nature” [9, p. 284]. Scholars of either science or rhetoric understand that all scientific documents have some rhetorical elements, but these elements often are ignored by readers. As Segal and Richardson put it, “[. . .] the rhetorical victory of scientists is that they have so fully persuaded us that we are, with them, in a world beyond rhetoric that we sometimes forget it was rhetoric itself that made us believe that we were” [10, p. 144].

Like rhetoric, framing often is subtle in science writing. As we have seen, framing is closely tied to rhetoric because it uses some rhetorical tools to present information in a particular context. Gross describes this context as a world view: “[. . .] through style, scientific communication conveys, along with the information it contains, a world view, a view of the world as the causal interaction of physical objects and events” [11, p. 935]. Gross’s comments indicate that the scientific world view provides part of the frame for scientific writing.

THE IPCC REPORT

The source document for this study is the 23-page report, “Summary for Policymakers,” released on April 6, 2007, by Working Group II of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Fourth Assessment Report. The cohort of documents written about the IPCC report includes five news articles from media sources and two news releases from oil companies responding to the report. Thus we will observe the techniques used to frame a report written by supposedly objective authors to inform government officials as well as the techniques used to frame news articles written by supposedly objective journalists to inform the general public.

I chose “Summary for Policymakers” as the source document for this analysis because it is one of several IPCC reports that are changing public opinion about global warming. “Summary for Policymakers” might prove to be the most influential of these reports because of the target audience stated in its title.

For the most part, “Summary for Policymakers” is framed as being objective and scientific, but buried within this framework is a call to action. The tone of the report is objective and impersonal. The report is written almost entirely in the third person, with the word “we” being used only twice: “From the current Assessment we conclude [. . .]” [12, p. 2] and “At present we do not have a clear picture of the limits to adaptation, or the cost [. . .]” [12, p. 18].

The language of the report is understated, especially where it concerns human suffering. Here, the report discusses some expected impacts of climate change in Africa:

Agricultural production, including access to food, in many African countries and regions is projected to be severely compromised by climate variability and change. The area suitable for agriculture, the length of growing seasons and yield potential, particularly along the margins of semi-arid and arid areas, are expected to decrease. This would further adversely affect food security and exacerbate malnutrition in the continent. In some countries, yields from rain-fed agriculture could be reduced by up to 50% by 2020 [12, p. 10].

Instead of using words like famine or starvation, the report describes “access to food” being “compromised” and “food security” being “adversely affected.” These terms make crop failure and drought sound more like an inconvenience than a disaster. “Malnutrition”—itself a clinical term—is the only word in the paragraph that gives any indication of the human suffering that can be expected to take place over the next 13 years.

While the element of human suffering is not emphasized in the report, it is not ignored, either. The report does not sugar coat the possibility of “increased deaths, disease and injury due to heat waves, floods, storms, fires and droughts” [12, p. 9]. The word “death” and its less dramatic synonym, “mortality,” each appear five times in the report.

The design of the document is subdued for the most part, as one would expect from a scientific document. There are only three uses of color in the report: a map, a chart, and the endboxes [12, pp. 5, 15, 22-23]. The only graphic elements on the cover page are solid horizontal rules.

Within each section of the report, bold subheadings serve as navigation aids. Written as complete sentences, these subheads provide a thumbnail sketch of the text to follow, functioning as both subheadings and pullouts. These subheadings help to frame the document by emphasizing certain statements in the text. For example, the subheadings “Adaptation will be necessary to address impacts resulting from the warming which is already unavoidable due to past emissions” and “A portfolio of adaptation and mitigation measures can diminish the risks associated with climate change” clearly advocate certain actions and help frame the document as a call to action [12, pp. 18, 20].

NEWS ARTICLES ABOUT THE REPORT

The dual framing of the report as both a subdued factual report and a call to action is a function of the multiple authors who contributed to the report and their multiple agendas. According to Borenstein’s account in the Associated Press, there was quite a bit of conflict between the scientists, who wanted more of a call

to action, and diplomats from some countries, who wanted to understate certain information:

A comparison of the original document, written by scientists, and the finished paper showed major reductions in forecasts for hunger and flooding victims. Instead of “hundreds of millions” of potential flood victims, the report said “many millions.” A key mention of up to 120 million people at risk of hunger because of global warming was eliminated [13].

The paragraph above illustrates how information can be changed through the intertextual chain to frame documents in a particular way: from “hundreds of millions” in the original draft, to “many millions” in the final report, and back to “hundreds of millions” in a news article.

While shedding light on the process that helped frame the report, Borenstein very carefully frames his own document as a narrative of the conflict, casting the scientists as heroes and diplomats as cowards or villains. Borenstein labels scientists as “data-driven,” implying that they are interested only in facts and have no hidden agenda. The scientists are trying to warn against the dangers of “increased flooding, hunger, drought and diseases.” Diplomats fall into two categories: those labeled as “nuanced offend-no-one diplomats” and those who “play hard ball.”

Borenstein de-emphasizes a quote by diplomat Yvo de Boer, who defends the toned-down language of the final report, by sandwiching the quote between a pro-scientist quote from a Greenpeace observer and a statement that “those involved agree that the science is accurate and that global warming is changing the planet and projected to get much worse.”

Borenstein uses lopsided sources to frame the story in favor of the scientists’ position. He cites the report itself once, to illustrate the change from “hundreds of millions” to “many millions,” but he concludes the article by quoting five statements from the scientists’ technical summary. These statements, which he says are facts not included in the final report, range in length from one to three sentences each and are described in a quote from a scientist as “the real facts.” Once again Borenstein goes back up the intertextual chain to quote a technical summary that supports his frame rather than quoting the report that is the subject of his article.

A *New York Times* story by Kanter and Revkin also mentions the conflict between scientists and diplomats, but the *Times* story is framed as a call to action. The scientists are portrayed as authority figures and experts, while the diplomats “watered down” the language of the report [14]. But unlike Borenstein, Kanter and Revkin do not portray the report as being too mild; they frame the information in the report as the irrefutable evidence prompting their call to action.

Their references to the report treat it as absolute fact. The report has authority because it was authored by “hundreds of scientists.” It “described how species, water supplies, polar ice sheets, and regional climate conditions were already

responding to the global buildup of heat.” Thus, Kanter and Revkin build their frame by presenting a problem: human-caused global warming is real, it is already happening, and the scientific evidence is so overwhelming that it could not be refuted even by government officials from China, Saudi Arabia, and Russia. By mentioning these three governments, for which most American readers have no particular love, Kanter and Revkin encourage the reader to help build the frame.

Having established the report as absolute truth, Kanter and Revkin also cite the report as the source of the call to action:

The report, written by hundreds of scientists and reviewed by outside experts and government officials, warned that adaptation is essential because temperatures and seas will inevitably rise for decades [. . .]. But it said that efforts to reduce emissions could reduce, delay or avoid some of the harmful outcomes [14].

Kanter and Revkin make lopsided use of sources to frame their document by quoting six scientists about the severity of the situation and the urgency of immediate action, compared to one noncommittal quote from a U.S. government official. They also cite supporting technical documents supplied by the scientists, which possibly are the same documents referred to by Borenstein, but this is uncertain.

Omission of facts is a framing tool that all journalists use; they have to omit some of the report’s content unless they want a 23-page news article. Kanter and Revkin, like most journalists, include the more dramatic predictions such as starvation and floods, but exclude some details such as the number of centimeters sea levels are expected to rise. It is clear that Kanter and Revkin are framing their document in such a way as to urge readers to support government action to reduce greenhouse gasses. They are practicing public journalism as defined by Nichols and her co-authors:

Public journalism, thus, has set out to help members of the public come to see themselves as citizens, and hold them accountable for grappling with the full complexity of issues and become participants in civil society rather than mere spectators of it [15, p. 77].

Associated Press writer Michael Casey framed the story, “Millions Face Hunger from Climate Change,” in the context of human suffering. In the lead sentence, Casey asserts that the report warns of possible food shortages and drought. Interestingly, Casey cites hunger statistics that appear nowhere in the report: “[. . .] 50 million extra people at risk of hunger by 2020, an additional 132 million by 2050 and 266 million by 2080, the report said” [16]. I could not determine whether Casey is intentionally misleading readers or if these numbers were mistakenly quoted from one of the supporting documents mentioned by the other journalists.

Casey is mostly concerned with the human tragedy of starvation, flood, and drought, as well as the potential loss of income to people involved in agriculture, commercial fishing, and tourism. While Casey mentions the report's policy suggestions for adaptation, the details of these recommendations are omitted because they are not as essential to Casey's frame as they were to Kanter and Revkin's call to action.

The BBC news article, "Billions Face Climate Change Risk," is framed as straightforward reporting of the facts about climate change. Like Kanter and Revkin, the BBC article treats the information in the report as absolute truth. The report's reliability is established by including a description of the research behind the report: "The scientific work reviewed by IPCC scientists includes more than 29,000 pieces of data on observed changes in physical and biological aspects of the natural world" [17]. The major framing element is the lopsided use of sources: no quotes from climate change skeptics versus three quotes from members of IPCC Working Group II warning of human suffering due to climate change and calling for governments to take action.

Having established a tone of honest reporting of proven facts, the article includes some of the report's more alarming predictions mentioned in the other news accounts: water shortages, species extinction, and decreased crop yields. This simple textual frame of lopsided sources plus statements from the report is very effective in convincing the reader that global warming is both a scientific fact and a cause for concern.

OIL COMPANIES RESPOND TO THE REPORT

There is no such tone, no sign of crisis, in news releases from oil companies on the topic of climate change. Predictably, these news releases are framed to present the oil companies as good corporate citizens eager to be part of the solution. News releases by ExxonMobil and ConocoPhillips both mention the need to reduce greenhouse emissions, but neither mentions any of the possible effects of climate change. This omission of facts helps frame the news releases by downplaying the potential threat posed by climate change.

A news release by ExxonMobil in response to the IPCC report praises the report as "an important contribution to climate science" and boasts that scientists from the oil company participated in writing it, but the news release de-emphasizes both the certainty of the report's science and the urgency of the report's recommendations. The news release says the report "describes the scientific basis for concern" and "attempts for the first time to characterize the probabilities for change" [18]. Far from showing ironclad proof of a need for urgent action, these phrases frame the report as new information about a theoretical problem. The news release later states that there is "increasing evidence" of global warming, again making it sound as though climate change is a newly discovered and unproven theory.

The news release goes on to support policies to mitigate global warming, but says this should be done “keeping in mind the central importance of energy to the economies of the world” and “understanding the context of managing carbon emissions among other important world priorities, such as economic development, poverty eradication and public health.” The qualifiers “keeping in mind” and “understanding the context” allow the company to support change while defending the status quo.

The final paragraph states that ExxonMobil is already conducting research in new technologies, completing the frame that the company’s scientists are not only contributing to the IPCC report, but are working to solve the problem as well. The structure of the news release, along with careful selection of information, is essential to its frame: the news release begins with the company’s participation in the report, goes on to downplay the need for drastic policy change, and concludes with the company working to find solutions.

A ConocoPhillips news release dated April 11, 2007, is framed as a news report about the oil company joining U.S. Climate Action Partnership, a group “dedicated to the quick enactment of strong national legislation to require significant reductions of greenhouse gas emissions,” according to the news release [19].

The news release quotes ConocoPhillips CEO Jim Mulva as saying that such legislation should “be structured to avoid increasing the volatility of energy prices, and encourage energy efficiency” and “paced [. . .] in order to avoid undue impact on the economy.”

As was the case with the ExxonMobil news release, there is no mention of the effects of climate change. The ConocoPhillips news release concludes by saying the company is implementing policies to improve energy efficiency in its facilities and refineries, closing the frame of a news story about a good corporate citizen. The news release does not mention the IPCC report. As with any news release, the lopsided use of sources—sources from the company only—is essential to the frame.

An actual news story about this event by Kristen Hays in the *Houston Chronicle* does not quote the news release directly, but has numerous quotes from Mulva given at an April 11, 2007, news conference. Hays also quotes the first IPCC report, which was released in February 2007, as saying that research regarding climate change is “unequivocal” [20].

Hays frames her story in favor of the oil company, but she does practice good journalism by comparing ConocoPhillips’s alternative-fuel research to its peers, noting that it lags behind BP, Shell, and Chevron but that ExxonMobil also is not spending in this area. Hays quotes a spokesperson from a pro-environment investment firm, who says the company “could be doing a lot more” and “lags behind the curve.” These quotes, however, are sandwiched between statements about new programs ConocoPhillips is considering in renewable and alternative energy sources. This arrangement helps frame the story in favor of

the oil company, as does the story's conclusion, a quote from Mulva about the company being "quite proactive on climate change."

The framing of this story in a Houston newspaper about a Houston-based oil company can be analyzed in light of Cross and Lockyer's "Dynamics of Partisan Journalism." They write that the dynamics uncovered in their study "highlight how familiar processes of framing, agenda setting and journalist/source relationships [. . .] are inflected by the nature of local news production" and that "local news frames and agendas are constructed with the relationship between the local paper and local publics firmly in mind" [21, p. 287]. The pro-ConocoPhillips frame of the *Chronicle* story could be a result of these dynamics.

CONCLUSION

The IPCC report, written and edited by committee, lacked a consistent frame and was a hybrid between a bureaucratic report and a call to action. The news articles in this study from national or international sources appear to practice public journalism by presenting information in a frame that encourages readers to accept the evidence presented in the report or to support government action based on the report. Corporate news releases are carefully framed to present selected information in a context favorable to the company.

This framing analysis shows that writers of technical documents, corporate news releases, and news articles frame their documents chiefly by choosing which facts to include or exclude, which we noted earlier as one of the chief aspects of framing. This choice of facts can either focus information into a call for action, as was done in some news articles, or it can dilute or de-emphasize information, as was done in the oil company news releases.

Structural elements such as the positioning of information also are important in framing. These structural elements include techniques such as placing proposition facts or quotes at the beginning and end of the document and sandwiching anti-position facts or quotes between pro-position statements. Intertextual references can be used to frame documents by describing a source document as factual, then quoting or paraphrasing selected sections of the document.

This analysis shows that technical communicators need to develop a working knowledge of framing techniques in order to present their information in the desired context. Every document is framed in one way or another; a well-defined frame enables a writer to focus on the most pertinent information in a document.

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