A Guide to Analyzing Environmental Frames

Actors use frames to provide a mental model of how (part of) the world works and how it *should* work. Many assumptions, values, motivations, experiences and much knowledge are wrapped up in these models. Revisiting all of those commitments takes time and energy, and people generally do not actively think about them very much. Hence frames rest on a foundation of assumptions that people rarely revisit. Analyzing frames reveals the taken-for-granted assumptions so that we can better understand the role they play in public policy and discourse.

Now, how to go about doing this?

I like to approach frames as mental models that people use to make sense of and communicate *problems*. Thinking about frames in relation to environmental problems helps me keep my work grounded and connects abstract, academic theory to practical questions confronting society right now. Seen through the lens of frames, response to big environmental issues rest on particular ways in which people define, address, and resolve problems. If we boil it down, for any given public problem we want to know three simple things:

Q1. What is the problem?

Q2. What options are available to deal with the problem?

Q3. How will people know the problem has been solved?

Different actors will answer the questions differently. Ideally, we want to survey the ways in which a variety of actors frame a given issue so that we get a sense of the range of possibilities. Since the nuances matter in conducting such a survey, I have been working on a guide for a more in-depth analysis of frames. Here are some basic questions to use as a starting point to analyze and interrogate a given actor's framing of an environmental issue. The goal is to answer each from the actor's point of view.

1. **Understanding the Actor in Context**
   a. To what audience is the actor speaking?
   b. For whom does the actor speak?
   c. Against whom is the actor arguing? *It can help to compare arguments against one another to determine where the most relevant points of agreement and disagreement lie.*
   d. What resources does the actor have at their disposal? *Resources might be monetary, social status, education, information, legal authority, force, popular will, etc.*
   e. Does the actor occupy a position of authority? What is it, and with respect to whom?

2. **Understanding the Problem**
   a. What problem does the actor identify? *Try to summarize concisely (imagine a twitter post) in your own words.*
   b. What caused the problem, and who is responsible?

     c. Is it a collective problem or a problem for individuals?

     d. At what scale does the problem exist? *Is it local, regional, national, global?*

     e. Over what timeframe does the problem exist? *Is it a short-term or long-term problem?*

     f. Is it political (i.e. we need to distribute power and resources differently)?

     g. Is the problem isolated or interrelated with other problems?

3.   Understanding the Goals

     a. What are the stakes? *For example, money, power, efficiency, justice, the public good, biodiversity, health, security, knowledge, etc.*

     b. Who stands to lose out? Who stands to benefit? And how?

     c. Why does the actor care? *i.e. do they have a financial stake? Is it their job? Are their friends, family, or community involved? Do they seek social status or prestige?*

4.   Understanding the Resolution

     a. What tools are available to the actor or their audience to deal with the problem?

     b. What options do those tools present for resolving the problem?

     c. Who may participate in seeking resolution? Who is left out or excluded?

     d. How does the actor or their audience know if they're doing a good job or a bad job in resolving the problem? What are the criteria, or indicators, of success or failure?

5.   Understanding the Big Picture

     a. Where does the actor draw boundaries around the world? What scales matter? *i.e. is this an individual problem, a local problem, a state problem, a national problem, an industry-specific problem, somebody else's problem etc.*

     b. What time-frame matters? *The next fiscal quarter? The next year? The term limit of a political office? The length of a human generation? A lifetime? This century? Indefinite?*

     c. What counts as a cause and what counts as an effect? *Think of the Dust Bowl example: in story 1, harsh nature is the cause of human suffering and opportunity for bravery while in story 3 human exploitation of the land is the cause of natural disaster.*

     d. What can be known about the problem? In particular, are there limits to knowledge? Are there limits to control? What is within human power and what is beyond?

     e. What counts as a "fact" or evidence? Who knows things? *i.e. peer-reviewed literature, unbiased experts, experienced practitioners, legal decisions, public opinion.*