

ANALYSIS OF APPLIED PERSUASION THEORY AND FRAMING EFFECTS IN  
ASTROTURF MOBILIZATION CAMPAIGNS FOR TELECOMMUNICATIONS  
DEREGULATION

By

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To my family and friends

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This study examines three astroturf organizations and the way they frame messages about the debate over telecommunications deregulation. While there are inherent components of social change and social responsibility, the primary purpose of the current study is to determine whether these organizations frame messages about telecommunications deregulation in the same way as journalists, legislators, and telecommunications industry experts.

This research indicates that there is a correlation between message frames present in the news media and message frames present in statements made by legislators and industry experts during Congressional hearings. However, these communicators do not frame their messages about telecommunications deregulation in the same way as the astroturf organizations studied here. Therefore, one might hypothesize that these astroturf organizations are not successful in influencing anyone outside of their own membership base and that the members of astroturf organizations don't seem to be successful in influencing their government representatives.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

As grassroots organizations and lobbying firms have evolved, each has begun to borrow tactics from the other (Klotz, 2007). This convergence has facilitated a new trend in political persuasion that is commonly referred to as astroturf mobilization (Silverstein & Taylor, 2007). While some scholars have identified this trend as a type of corporate capitalization of grassroots efforts, it does have some potential as a legitimate campaign strategy that could be an effective public relations approach to campaigning in the event that a clean elections environment evolves. Alternatively, this method could provide an alternative to traditional lobbies that fail to convey their messages or to traditional grassroots movements that become weak due to their decentralized organization (Brulle & Jenkins, 2006; Shellenberger & Nordhaus, 2005).

While there has been sufficient research regarding the legitimacy of the astroturf movements, there has not been sufficient scholarly debate on their effectiveness, nor has there been sufficient research to understand their use of message frames and the way those message frames might influence more mainstream communicators. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to examine three astroturf organizations with the goal of identifying the message frames they use and determining whether these same message frames appear in other venues. More specifically, this study will examine whether the frames present in messages disseminated by these astroturf organizations are also present in the rhetoric and messages presented to and by policy makers during Congressional hearings and in print media related to the ongoing debate over telecommunications deregulation. This study is intended to be explanatory in

nature and, as such, the researcher will attempt to explain the impact, if any, of astroturf communications on mainstream media.

## CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The three organizations examined in this study—FreedomWorks, the Progress and Freedom Foundation, and Frontiers of Freedom’s Center for Economic Liberty and Property Rights—have been identified by PR Watch as astroturf organizations (PR Watch, 2006). In the following sections, a discussion will ensue regarding the evolution of astroturf organizations, the theoretical foundation of their effectiveness, and their employment in the debate over telecommunications deregulation.

### **The Evolution of Astroturf Mobilization**

The practice of lobbying our nation’s leadership is almost as old as the nation itself, yet, as the public grows increasingly cynical of the government’s use or abuse of money, the role of lobbying also becomes increasingly scrutinized (Silverstein & Taylor, 2007). In order to “protect public confidence in government,” Congress passed the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995, which enumerates a variety of disclosure requirements and industry restrictions with the intention of regulating lobbyists and their influence over public officials (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2000).

However, critics of the enhanced regulation argue that the scope of this legislation was not sufficiently broad to ensure greater transparency in lobbying procedures. Instead of implementing new procedures that strictly adhere to the new requirements, organizations—including those examined in this study—have avoided these requirements by planting fake grassroots movements—astroturf movements—that mobilize citizens to take up the lobbying effort on the organizations’ behalf (Silverstein & Taylor, 2007). FreedomWorks, for example, emails Action Alerts to registered members. These alerts, which tend to caution recipients about Democratic

fear-mongering, ironically utilize the audience's fears to provoke some action or behavior that will advance the interests of the organization and its founders, but will not necessarily advance the interests of the recipients.

In addition to direct email, such as that which is mentioned above, all three organizations examined here utilize a variety of grassroots mobilization tactics such as letter-writing campaigns, marches, and member conferences (FreedomWorks, 2007; Silverstein, 1998). As an example of content, FreedomWorks' version of direct email, known as the Action Alert, contains "TAKE ACTION NOW" links that redirect an email recipient to a form letter that is pre-addressed to the relevant government officials. This form letter can be edited if the recipient so desires, and can then be sent directly from the Web site by email or snail mail.<sup>1</sup> By offering the use of these messages to the general public instead of relaying them directly to members of Congress, organizations like FreedomWorks seem to gain credibility through constituent endorsement while circumventing lobbying disclosure requirements.

However, despite the grassroots characteristics of these organizations, both the funding and the motivation for their activism tend to originate from corporate sponsors and sometimes from the legislators that these organizations lobby the most. FreedomWorks, for example, is involved in energy and environmental campaigns that seem to align with the goals of organizations such as Chevron and the American Petroleum Institute—two of FreedomWorks corporate sponsors (FreedomWorks, 2007; Silverstein, 1998; Silverstein & Taylor, 2007). The resulting third-party endorsement of the corporations that fund its research makes FreedomWorks look like a front group for

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that examples drawn from FreedomWorks will be particularly frequent throughout this study because this organization is the most active in mobilizing constituent support.

these corporations—an accusation that is hard to prove, but that casts doubt on the credibility of the organization’s messages (Silverstein, 1998).

In response to such veiled attempts at avoiding lobbying regulation, the Senate sought to prevent further abuses of apparent loopholes in the existing lobbying regulation by passing the Legislative Transparency and Accountability Acts of 2006 and 2007. Among the bills’ provisions is a section enumerating policy regarding the “disclosure of paid efforts to stimulate grassroots lobbying” (“Legislative Transparency and Accountability Act of 2006,” 2006; “Legislative Transparency and Accountability Act of 2007,” 2007). This new legislation addresses de facto astroturf lobbyists that were previously exempt from registering as lobbyists because they do not lobby the White House or members of Congress directly.

Although the use of grassroots tactics certainly represents a new distinction within the lobbying function, the justification used to avoid compliance with lobbying regulation is not much different than that once proffered by foreign agents (Silverstein & Taylor, 2007). Therefore, it is not surprising that the 2006 and 2007 legislation use language similar to that found in the Foreign Agents Registration Act when defining a grassroots lobbyist or a grassroots lobbying firm as “a person or entity that [is] retained by one or more clients to engage in paid efforts to stimulate grassroots lobbying... [and] receives income of, or spends or agrees to spend, an aggregate of \$25,000 or more for such efforts in any quarterly period” (“Legislative Transparency and Accountability Act of 2006,” 2006; US Department of Justice, 2007).

In addition to this stipulation, the bill requires astroturf lobbying firms to register with the Secretary of the Senate and the Clerk of the House of Representatives within

forty-five days of being retained for such purposes ("Legislative Transparency and Accountability Act of 2006," 2006). Based on this legislation, the astroturf organizations would be required to disclose their contributors, which they now do, and, more importantly, that disclosure subjects astroturf lobbyists to the same regulations as traditional lobbyists, making it more difficult for them to evade lobbying rules and more difficult for their contributors to purchase third-party credibility. Although, at the same time, this increased disclosure makes it easier for astroturf mobilizers and traditional lobbyists to integrate their efforts towards achieving legislation that will be more amenable to the organizations that they represent.

### **Theory and Message Construction in Astroturf Mobilization**

The evolution of this new type of lobbying marks the inception of a new branch of public relations practice, which is primarily characterized by the distinction between target publics. While traditional lobbying focuses on facilitating two-way symmetrical relationships between the client and the appropriate legislator, astroturf practitioners are charged with persuading a new public—the general public—to mobilize in support of a paying client. These mobilizers utilize several techniques, some of which borrow heavily from grassroots organizers, and include press releases and editorials available for reprint in the mass media, direct emailing, and letter/email campaigns that assist constituents in writing to their government representatives at national, state, and local levels. This last function, in particular, is similar to that of media relations in its use of indirect message dissemination, and it can be characterized by an asymmetrical message flow through which the astroturf organization attempts to persuade the general public without providing any clear mechanisms for the public to initiate communication with the organization. Instead, members of the public are directed to identify with and

claim ownership of the organization's message by electing to forward it on to the legislators and policy makers that represent them.

Unlike the media, who generate coverage based on the needs and interests of their readers and advertisers, with the potential ancillary effect of disseminating the practitioner's message, astroturf organizations set out to persuade audiences that their issues mirror the needs and interests of the public. Then, if the organization is effective in dictating the public agenda, it may work towards mobilizing the general public to advocate on its behalf, regardless of the existence of any resulting public benefit. If a member of the general public supports the aims of the client, that member becomes an actor in the flow of message distribution. If the practitioner recruits a sufficient number of supporting actors, the chances of achieving the desired policy outcome should increase; if not, then the practitioner should fail.

Due to the mutually exclusive dichotomy of this type of lobbying effort, the two-way symmetrical approach to public relations practice posited by the Grunigs' (1992) Excellence Theory is inappropriate to astroturf mobilization campaigns. The Grunigs' (1992) model requires that an equilibrium of advocacy and accommodation exists between an organization and its publics (A. Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997; Coombs, 1998). When such equilibrium is present, Coombs (1998) argues that a mutually beneficial relationship based on two-way communication can be achieved, although, such a relationship may or may not be ideal, necessary, or even ethical (A. Cancel, et al., 1997; A. E. Cancel, Mitrook, & Cameron, 1999; Coombs & Holladay, 2004; B. H. Reber & Cameron, 2003).

The relationship sought by astroturf mobilizers does not need to be mutually beneficial in order to accomplish the asymmetrical message flow from organization to constituent to government representative that is described above. Moreover, the accommodation of publics in a mutually beneficial relationship may even threaten achievement of the policy goals advocated by the organization by compromising the message in deference to variants in public opinion. Therefore, instead of seeking to relate with a wide range of publics, the organization would gain the most legislative support, and thus achieve its objective most completely, by persuading the largest possible portion of the public of the relevance of the organization's exact goals, with as little compromise as necessary.

Although, just because pure accommodation of publics is inappropriate in this type of situation does not mean that pure advocacy on behalf of the organization is warranted either. Rather, the contingency theory of accommodation indicates that communication occurs along a continuum that ranges from pure advocacy, or conflict, to pure accommodation, or cooperation (A. E. Cancel, et al., 1999; Murphy, 1991). Regardless of an organization's predisposition to either advocacy or accommodation, Reber and Cameron (2003) argue, practitioners must account for and prioritize both their own needs and the needs of their publics in order to identify their stance on the continuum with respect to a given issue. The ability to shift organizational stance along the continuum, in either direction, then allows practitioners to imagine the nuances of infinite contingencies (A. Cancel, et al., 1997). Although, given the cost of accommodation in lobbying and astroturf campaigning—i.e., failure to persuade target publics by accommodating their positions instead of advocating on behalf of the client—

taking a stance toward the advocacy extreme is not only expected, but also the most appropriate campaign for this type of situation (A. E. Cancel, et al., 1999; Coombs, 1998; B. H. Reber & Cameron, 2003).

The resulting polar nature of astroturf campaigns is comparable to that found in litigation public relations in that any outcome other than success constitutes failure (B. Reber, Gower, & Robinson, 2006). Therefore, the practice of astroturf mobilization requires the use of asymmetrical advocacy communication similar to that used in litigation public relations practice, the goal of which, according to Reber et al. (2006), “is to reinforce the legal strategy and theory of the case to ensure a win.” Although such a process runs counter to the two-way symmetrical approach confirmed as a best practice by J. Grunig’s (1992) excellence theory for public relations, asymmetrical communication is appropriate to litigation public relations due to its adversarial nature (B. Reber, et al., 2006).

A similar adversarial nature exists in lobbying, which is defined by a group’s efforts in “influencing current policy or creating a relationship conducive to shaping future policy to the benefit of the [group]” (Thomas, 2005). Although the relationship between the lobbyist and the policy maker may be mutually beneficial, the same may not be true of the relationship between the lobbyist and the general public. The conflicting relationship that results then puts lobbyists at odds with public advocates such as activists and regulatory groups, which then become extraneous stakeholders in the lobbyist’s activities. Viewed from this perspective, the obvious solution seems to be astroturf mobilization, which “involves engaging group members [of the astroturf organization]... with a perceived stake in an issue to persuade lawmakers to support the

group's public policy goals" (Showalter & Fleisher, 2005). However, first, the astroturf organizations must garner support for their positions from independent citizens, incite them to seek membership, and then persuade members that they do, in fact, have a stake in a given issue.

FreedomWorks, for example, persuades its members by framing every issue on their agenda within the context of taxes, their slogan being, "Lower taxes, less government, more freedom" (FreedomWorks, 2007). By defining taxes as an overarching political problem and diagnosing its cause as excess government intervention, FreedomWorks places itself in a position to offer solutions to individuals who either agree with, or have been persuaded to agree with, FreedomWorks' position (Callaghan & Schnell, 2001). Addressing policy situations in this way allows lobbyists to narrow their focus to constituents. This approach provides the potential to avoid the stringent regulations imposed when lobbying policy makers directly and, at the same time, gives organizations like FreedomWorks third-party credibility through their astroturf membership base.

However, this focus on recruiting members of the general public to join an astroturf organization is independent of any intention of building mutually beneficial relationships between the astroturf organization and the public, or even between the organization and its members; rather, it is a means to mobilize "ancillary groups that may be peripherally impacted by an issue" in order to demonstrate "constituent concern" in alignment with those groups that support the astroturf organization (Showalter & Fleisher, 2005). This objective devalues true input from group members and the general public, while favoring persuasive organizational output, unless, of course, the

public can be effectively persuaded to believe that the organizational goals are in alignment with contemporary societal norms, beliefs, and opinions (Payne, 2001).

There are two main benefits of persuading the general public to advocate on behalf of an organization rather than paying lobbyists or other advocates to persuade policy makers and regulatory bodies directly—these benefits are accountability and credibility (Beder, 1998). The former is more about protection than persuasion. That is, if the message falls out of favor with the general public for any reason, the entity that benefits from dissemination of that message can protect itself from unfavorable scrutiny because this entity will not be credited with responsibility for the message. Instead, the front group or astroturf organization that has been charged with disseminating the message on the entity's behalf will be held accountable (Beder, 1998). Such protection is further extended as members of the front group begin to build a social network based on the ideas disseminated by the front group and, in accordance to the Homophily Principle, begin to attract new members that already hold attitudes in alignment with the group's values or, at least, believe that they do (Knoke, 1990). Therefore, members will feel accountable for and take ownership of the front group's messages because they will believe it to be consistent with their own preexisting attitudes.

FreedomWorks, for example, encourages such network building by including a "Forward to a Friend" button in each Action Alert email. By clicking that button, current members can have an Action Alert forwarded to five potentially like-minded friends, which can then result in both membership growth for the front group and increased interpersonal communication regarding the front group's values among existing social networks (Knoke, 1990). The latter effect is particularly important to the persuasion

process because it is a crucial component of Slater's (1999) cyclical multistep flow process, which indicates that interpersonal communication influences "perceived social norms and expectations concerning behavior," increases the salience of the issue being communicated, and leads to further interpersonal communication. As a result, individuals who become involved in an issue through the multistep flow process gain awareness of the issue and, through the organizational tools provided by FreedomWorks, an opportunity to consider action (Hallahan, 2000; Slater, 1999).

FreedomWorks communicators facilitate this process even further by utilizing the sequential influence techniques of interpersonal communication theory in formulating Action Alerts (Perloff, 2003). For example, in an Action Alert titled *Stop the Al Gore and United Nations Climate of Fear Campaign!*, the organization incorporates the fear-then-relief compliance technique by heading its email alert with an alarming exclamation that promotes the implication that Al Gore and the UN are conspiring to mislead the public and must be stopped (FreedomWorks, 2007a; Perloff, 2003). Then, in the first paragraph of the message, the threat is immediately relieved with a brief explanation of the upcoming opportunity that constituents would have to dissuade their representatives from aligning with Gore's position. This particular message was released just before the Memorial Day weekend, for which representatives would be likely to visit their districts and participate in town hall meetings as well as other local public events where constituents can raise their newly salient concerns about Gore's climate change campaign (FreedomWorks, 2007a; Slater, 1999). Furthermore, while the message does not contain the kind words typically present in a fear-then-relief strategy, it does request that readers comply with the organization's position by inciting them to "TAKE

ACTION NOW!”<sup>2</sup> both by instantly generating a letter to their representative—as mentioned above—and by motivating message recipients to speak with their representative directly during the upcoming holiday (FreedomWorks, 2007a; Hallahan, 2000).

Such direct communication between constituents and representatives leads to the other main benefit of astroturf mobilization: credibility (Beder, 1998). Since representatives are primarily accountable to their constituents, it would follow that constituents—as opposed to other public policy stakeholders such as the corporations that the front groups represent—should have the highest levels of credibility from the perspective of the policy makers. Furthermore, as one might expect, research has shown that the credibility of a communicator is positively correlated with the persuasiveness of his or her message (Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994; Griffin, Neuwirth, Giese, & Dunwoody, 2002; Meyers-Levy & Maheswaran, 2004). Credibility, like other heuristics, aids the audience—in this case, policy makers—in evaluating messages without systematically processing all available or existing information (Pfau & Wan, 2006).

The utility of the credibility heuristic is not limited to the constituent-legislator interaction; rather, it is also prominent in the astroturf messages at several different levels—primarily, the source level. For example, all of the FreedomWorks Action Alerts are signed by “FreedomWorks Chairman and Former [United States] House Majority Leader Dick Armey” (FreedomWorks, 2007). Not only is Armey a figure head of the organization, but he also had 17 years of policy-making experience in the United States

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<sup>2</sup> Capitalization in original.

House of Representatives ("Biographical Directory of the United States Congress," 2007; FreedomWorks, 2007). Whether his work in the legislature was positive or not is irrelevant because participants in his social network—in this case, members of Armeý's front group and targets of his messages—are likely to be "politically homogeneous" (Knoke, 1990). Therefore, in addition to maintaining credibility, Armeý is likely to be perceived as an expert by FreedomWorks members, which, in turn, should trigger a second heuristic in members' minds—that Armeý, as an expert, should be trusted (Meyers-Levy & Maheswaran, 2004; O'Keefe, 2002).

The inclusion of these heuristics—source credibility and experts can be trusted—are important to the construction of persuasive messages, such as those discussed here, because research has shown that audiences tend to rely on heuristics rather than process messages systematically (Pfau & Wan, 2006). Heuristic processing is helpful because it is more efficient and less time-consuming to rely on decision rules than it would be to systematically process every available piece of information, and also because some segments of the target audience may not have the skills necessary to systematically process some messages (Hallahan, 2000; Pfau & Wan, 2006).

Hallahan (2000) tells us that, in order to process the messages presented to them, audiences must have the motivation, ability, and opportunity to do so. If just one of these three criteria is missing, the audience may not choose—or may not be able—to process a message at all. Therefore, heuristics—also known as peripheral message cues—can be used to capture the audience's attention, demonstrate message relevance, and express the utility of a message to the target audience regardless of their level of motivation, ability, or opportunity to evaluate it (Hallahan, 2000).

Although the use of heuristics—rather than systematic information processing—is negatively correlated with the strength of the audience’s beliefs and attitudes, as well as the endurance of the message, researchers have found that, in addition to replacing systematic processing, heuristics can also bias systematic processing in situations where both processing modes are likely to be employed (Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994; Griffin, et al., 2002; Meyers-Levy & Maheswaran, 2004; Pfau & Wan, 2006). Specifically, Chaiken and Maheswaran (1994) found that both heuristic and systematic processing may be utilized simultaneously when the message is clear, it comes from a credible source, and the motivation to process the message is high—as would be the case with front group messages as judged by front group members. Furthermore, these researchers found that messages with high perceived source credibility—which is likely the case here—may even lead to deeper information processing because they are judged to be more highly relevant than messages from sources that lack credibility (Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994).

Perhaps that is why organizations such as FreedomWorks rely on a mix of these heuristics, along with interpersonal compliance strategies, to persuade members to persuade their government representatives. The additive effects of using these strategies together should incite change in both attitude and behavior. The Al Gore Action Alert, for example, utilizes the fear-then-relief compliance strategy, in conjunction with the credibility and expert heuristics, to motivate group members to take action while, at the same time, presenting a clear and easy opportunity to do so (Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994; Hallahan, 2000; Meyers-Levy & Maheswaran, 2004; Perloff, 2003). As such, group members have the ability to comply with the message whether or not

they have the ability to systematically process it. And, although the effects of FreedomWorks messages are not currently known, such a message should, in theory, result in the behavior that the front group is attempting to elicit (Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994; Hallahan, 2000; Slater, 1999).

However, it is also important for communicators to recognize that not all audiences will process messages in the same way. Rather, communicators must determine whether their publics are likely to process messages systematically or through the use of heuristics because the construction of effective messages will vary depending on the way in which they are processed. When addressing an audience that is likely to process messages heuristically, positively framed arguments—the hedonism heuristic—have been found to be more persuasive than negatively framed arguments (Meyers-Levy & Maheswaran, 2004). Alternatively, when addressing an audience that is likely to process messages systematically, negatively-framed, non-normative arguments are more persuasive because they are likely to contradict available heuristics, encouraging a deeper level of processing (Griffin, et al., 2002; Meyers-Levy & Maheswaran, 2004).

### **Message Framing**

However, message construction extends beyond the assignment of a positive or negative frame—valence framing—to a given issue (Hallahan, 1999). Hallahan (1999) identifies multiple levels of framing, including valence framing, semantic framing—the manipulation of words, such as the substitution of climate change for global warming—and story framing—which is the incorporation of narrative techniques in support of a key theme found throughout the message. Hallahan (1999) then goes on to define framing as a technique that “helps shape the perspectives through which people see the world”

by including certain elements of a given issue, giving emphasis where desired, and excluding other elements. Alternatively, framing can be defined as a three-stage communication process that serves the following four functions: 1) To identify an issue as a problem defined by costs and benefits; 2) to attribute responsibility for causing or resolving that problem; 3) to pass judgment; 4) to provide a resolution (de Vreese, 2005; Entman, 1993; Zoch & Molleda, 2006). As opposed to providing a theme for a message, framing is a structured attempt to organize a message in order to shape the inferences that individuals might make about a given topic (Hallahan, 1999; Reese, 2007).

The first stage of framing—“frame building”—take place when message frames begin to emerge as a result of interactions between communicators and the audiences with which they interact (de Vreese, 2005). As long as communicators continue to interact with audiences, frames may continue to emerge (de Vreese, 2005; Zoch & Molleda, 2006). Therefore, it is important to conceptualize this first stage of framing as a continuous, foundational process rather than the first step in a chronological progression of events. Although, once frames begin to emerge, it is possible to engage in the second stage of framing—“frame-setting”—which, according to de Vreese (2005), “refers to the interaction between media frames and individuals’ prior knowledge and predispositions.” Finally, as communicators continue to build and set frames, the final stage—the consequences stage—takes place. Consequences of framing may include, but are not limited to, individual attitudinal change, or impact on “political socialization, decision-making, and collective actions” (de Vreese, 2005).

In summary, framing, by any definition is a process by which communicators can identify, develop, co-opt, or disseminate common frames of reference within the communicative process. Sometimes, these frames of reference are best described as issue frames because they refer specifically to a single issue (de Vreese, 2005). Issue frames allow the researcher to conduct a highly detailed analysis of a specific topic, but make it difficult to generalize results to other studies within the framing community (de Vreese, 2005). Alternatively some frames are common throughout the framing literature and have been identified in various types of media (de Vreese, 2005; Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Valkenburg, Semetko, & de Vreese, 1999). These “generic frames” include ‘conflict,’ ‘human interest,’ ‘human impact,’ ‘attribution of responsibility,’ ‘morality,’ ‘powerlessness,’ ‘and economic consequences’ (de Vreese, 2005; Neuman, et al., 1992; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000).

Framing, though, does not begin and end within the text of a message. Elements within the text, such as vocabulary, citation of sources, and cultural references are just a few of the tools employed when framing a message. Textual framing, and particularly narrative framing within the text, is the focus of the present study, but it is not the only place in which frames might occur. Entman (1993) notes that frames may also come from the communicator, the audience, or the surrounding cultural framework. Since message framing provides a framework for interpretation, it is important to recognize the effects that these other framing sources may have on the interpretation of text and textual frames (Entman, 1993; Martinez & Kiousis, 2005; Zoch & Molleda, 2006). Martinez and Kiousis (2005) did just that when they suggested that, in the end, “the audience determines what the dominant frame will be.” Thus, no matter how much the

communicator manipulates the message and regardless of the way the communicator interprets the subject of the message, the contextual boundaries of the target audience will dictate the final meaning of the message and the frame through which it is interpreted.

A thorough understanding of message framing and the incorporation of heuristics into the asymmetrical communications utilized by astroturf organizations is particularly important in the analysis of messages regarding telecommunications deregulation because it is a topic that applies to the general public, yet may be too complicated for many members of the public to understand. Perhaps that is the why the relationship between telecommunications policy makers (the FCC) and the general public has failed to foment while the relationship between the FCC and lobbyists representing the telecommunications industry has grown so strong. Yet, in recent years, there has been a growing mass of news coverage regarding the public's outrage at the apparent proximity of that relationship. Therefore, major news outlets have devoted increasing time and space to FCC proceedings and public hearings, creating an environment of basic public awareness that seems favorable for astroturf organizations to increase their public membership around the issue of deregulating the industry and, thereby, allowing a stronger relationship between the industry and the public.

### **Technical and Political Arguments For and Against Deregulation**

Also central to the debate over the deregulation of telecommunications is the need to maintain a free and competitive marketplace while protecting the public interest ( Public Interest Advisory Council, 1998). For government-initiated, bi-partisan groups like the Public Interest Advisory Council (PIAC), these two goals are seen as competing ideals that must be juxtaposed into a comprehensive policy that will accommodate two

ends of a spectrum—on one end lies the marketplace, which favors majority opinion and, at the other, lies the greater public interest, which incorporates the needs of every member of the public as opposed to just those of the majority. In most industries, protecting the marketplace of ideas through anti-trust legislation would be sufficient to ensure fair competition and to spur innovation. However, there is no mechanism in free market economics to ensure that the needs of the entire public—not just the majority—are met. Therefore, the telecommunications industry—similar to transportation, energy utilities, and currency exchange—has been distinguished as one of the national infrastructures that have public interest obligations beyond the needs of the majority or those of the market (Horwitz, 1989).

Thus, members of the telecommunications industry are generally regulated as common carriers and are legally bound, as are the other designated infrastructure industries, to ensure common service that is in the interest of the public as a whole (Horwitz, 1989; Public Interest Advisory Council, 1998). However, unlike the other three infrastructure industries mentioned above, the organizations within the telecommunications industry may also fulfill the role of information service providers, which falls outside of the common carrier function. In addition to providing a common conduit for the transportation of data and information, telecommunications entities, such as cable providers, are also providing the content traveling through any given conduit. The resulting duality of a telecommunications common carrier that is also providing content makes the implementation of regulatory policy tenuous in that any legitimate regulation must protect the public's right of access to information while at the same time

preserving the first amendment rights of the information service provider as a free speaker.

Given the ambiguous role of telecommunications providers, the justification for telecommunications regulation must center on a dual interpretation of the First Amendment. On one hand, the rights of content providers are embodied by the right of free speech and sometimes also freedom of the press. On the other hand, the public interest is protected by the Madisonian principles, which maintain the right to equal outcome for competing voices—varying segments of the public—in much the same way that the principles of capitalism protect the free market and the right to equal opportunity for competing entities. In contrast to the model of majority rule, the Madisonian principles preserve a diversity of voices in the marketplace that may be independent of the majority interest. The regulated entities responsible for protecting that diversity play the role of public trustees (Public Interest Advisory Council, 1998).

Both public interest and free market regulations must remain in balance in order to ensure both the continued fulfillment of the industry's public interest obligations and perpetuation of the telecommunications infrastructure. Horwitz (1989) supports regulation from the market perspective by arguing that “capitalists, acting on their own, pursuing the logic of profit maximization, cannot adequately safeguard the conditions which allow their industry—when taken as a whole—to flourish.” He argues that regulation prevents abuse by larger or stronger companies, protecting the marketplace—not just the public—from monopolistic domination.

However, scholars, including Horwitz, have also found that strict regulation restricts telecommunications service providers from developing new technologies and

services, as was the case with AT&T as it was coming to the end of its monopoly over telephone service (Cheng, Bandyopadhyay, & Guo, 2007; Horwitz, 1989; Public Interest Advisory Council, 1998). While strict regulation of the phone company in its early days helped foster technological growth within AT&T and prevent the construction of redundant telephone networks, AT&T's isolation from free market competition ensured profits with or without innovation and eventually lead to corporate complacency with obsolete technology (Aufderheide, 1999). Thus, there comes a time in the evolution of any industry at which point heavy regulation is particularly unjustified because it will begin to inhibit commercial development and prevent regulated entities from effectively serving the public's interest, convenience, and necessity—which are the basic goals of federal oversight in the first place (Public Interest Advisory Council, 1998).

This ultimate failure of the regulatory system to meet its primary goals has resulted in a unique policy debate that positions the regulatory agency and regulated industries against a bi-partisan coalition comprised of both “conservative free market ideologues” and liberal policy makers (Horwitz, 1989; Public Interest Advisory Council, 1998). While the former group advocates for a free marketplace of ideas to the benefit of telecommunications companies, the latter advocates in favor of the Madisonian principles and believes in protecting the rights of under-served telecommunications consumers (Horwitz, 1989; Public Interest Advisory Council, 1998). Both parties believe that their constituencies will be better served by increased competition, which requires a telecommunications environment that is, to some degree, deregulated.

From the liberal perspective, “regulatory agencies are often said to be captured by the regulated parties, which then utilize the state apparatus for private ends”

(Horwitz, 1989). Instead of advocating on behalf of consumers, regulators in this instance would be compliant with the needs of the regulated industry and effectively protecting incumbent entities from competition. Alternatively, a conservative proponent of deregulation would argue that new technology has broken the boundaries of existing regulation, which prevents incumbents from competing with new unregulated entrants to the marketplace (Horwitz, 1989).

Such a situation played out in Wisconsin in 2005 when the state's Public Service Commission decided to deregulate incumbent SBC's local phone rates (Content, 2005). Although SBC was the state's largest local telephone provider at that time, the company argued, and the commission agreed, that there was increasing competition for telephone service from cellular and cable providers as well as other phone companies and newer technologies. Thus, it seemed that unregulated entities like the cellular companies using new technologies or regulated entities like the cable companies offering unregulated services like cable modems had an advantage over SBC, which was previously barred by franchise agreements or other types of regulation from effective competition.

However, the irony of the SBC situation was that, in this instance, deregulation did not truly open the telephone market to new entrants; rather, the decision to deregulate phone service in Wisconsin merely allowed the incumbent telephone provider to compete more effectively against the incumbent cable operator and Internet service providers operating in the region. Thus, this instance of deregulation served the interests of the two incumbent telecommunications providers instead of the public interest or the interests of potential new entrants to the market. Perhaps that is one of

the reasons that Sunstein (2000) argued that government regulation, in some form, will be necessary as long as the telecommunications industry is privately controlled.

However, while the arguments of Sunstein (2000) and Horwitz (1989) focus on the political justifications of regulation, or lack thereof, other scholars focus instead on the technical arguments for deregulation. Hazlett (1997) and Werbach (2002), for example, favor deregulation because technological innovation has overcome fears of spectrum scarcity and can no longer be used to justify continued regulation. Hazlett (1997) argues that the decision to regulate telecommunications is no longer a binary choice between anarchy on the airwaves or controlled use and distribution of a finite broadcast spectrum. Instead, frequencies of the finite spectrum can be infinitely divisible, and frequency space is expanding with new innovations and technologies (Hazlett, 1997). Hazlett (1997) then argues that the myth of physical scarcity has only prevailed as a means for the FCC to maintain control over information disseminating resources.

Alternatively, Werbach (2002) points out that the idea of spectrum scarcity is not a complete myth. Rather than viewing spectrum as a limitless resources, as did Hazlett (1997), Werbach (2002) finds spectrum to be akin to a common grazing ground or a public highway system in that users must operate under certain limitations and within certain boundaries in order to “facilitate efficient use” and avoid prematurely exhausting otherwise renewable resources. While this argument may seem to support the continued use of licensing and franchise agreements, it is actually identifying them as barriers to market entry. Therefore, Werbach (2002) specifies that future policy should foster cooperation among incumbents and new market entrants by promoting the

research and development of unlicensed wireless technology, designating additional spectrum for unlicensed uses, and eliminating restrictions on non-intrusive underlay techniques like low-power FM. If such policy existed today, the reduced regulation encompassed therein would, perhaps, facilitate sufficient competition in all areas of telecommunications to warrant a more complete deregulation of the industry.

### **Mobilizing the Public toward Deregulation**

Despite the strengths of the technical arguments, they merely support the socioeconomic motivations that drive the current public policy debate over deregulation. On one hand, there is a strong argument for the continued role of regulation in the telecommunications industry for its protection of both the industry and the public; on the other, a call to deregulate the industry to promote consumer choice and fair competition. Both sides represent benefits and constraints for both the industry and the public, lending support to PIAC's goal of writing inclusive public policy addressing both ends of the public interest-free market spectrum.

However, contrary to the complex debate presented by scholars and government advisory committees, several deregulation interest groups have turned to astroturf lobbying tactics to promote unfettered and one-sided telecommunications deregulation in favor of the telecommunications industry. PR Watch (2006) has singled out the three interest groups discussed here—FreedomWorks, the Progress and Freedom Foundation, and Frontiers of Freedom's Center for Economic Liberty and Property Rights—for promulgating the benefits that deregulation brings to the industry and the public without sufficiently weighing the public interest consequences of turning the industry over to the free market (PR Watch, 2006). However, there has been little research to examine the impacts that these organizations have on public policy,

whether through the use of astroturf strategies to mobilize voters to influence policymakers or through media relations campaigns, which could reach voters and policy makers simultaneously.

### **FreedomWorks**

Of these three organizations, FreedomWorks, deserves particular attention owing to the group's early adoption of astroturf mobilization, its persistence in this method of lobbying despite criticism by political scholars and legislators, and its strong affiliation with the emerging Tea Party ("Legislative Transparency and Accountability Act of 2006," 2006; "Legislative Transparency and Accountability Act of 2007," 2007; Silverstein, 1998; Silverstein & Taylor, 2007). According to its Web site, [www.freedomworks.org](http://www.freedomworks.org):

Taxes and government regulation slow down the growth of technological innovation. Government lawsuits against high-tech developers hamper the pace of innovation while costing the taxpayer money. Outdated government regulations pigeonhole companies - especially telephone companies - and make it difficult for them to react in a dynamic marketplace.

This position statement, found on the organization's *Communication and Technology: Issue Homepage*, synthesizes the deregulation debate into two basic prongs—that outdated regulation is both creating an undue financial burden on the taxpaying public and preventing legacy monopolies from freely competing in the current telecommunications market. These themes are reflected in one of the organization's articles regarding telecommunications policy, in which the author argues that local cable franchising has become obsolete. In the article—*Assessing the Case for Cable Franchise Reform*—Diane Katz (2007, April 2) of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy points out the negative effects of technological advances on cable franchise regulations.

Katz's (2007, April 2) article presents an example of the asymmetrical message construction indicative of lobbies engaged in astroturf mobilization. The majority of the

article focuses on the negative aspects of local cable franchise regulation—particularly their tendency to cause artificially high cable rates by passing franchise fees directly to cable consumers and the low quality of customer service caused by the complacency of franchise holders. She goes on to argue that the cost of complying with franchise requirements equivalent to those imposed on incumbents effectively prevents wire line and broadband competitors from entering the market even though federal law prohibits exclusive franchising of incumbent cable providers. Furthermore, Katz (2007, April 2) cites Hazlett and Ford's (2001) argument that the mere existence of new entrants to the cable market justifies a relaxation of franchise requirements, which were initially intended to regulate the rates set by the natural monopolies that no longer exist.

As these monopolies disappear, so does the need for franchise regulation, and disappearing franchise regulation, according to Katz (2007, April 2) and her interpretation of a 2004 study by the United States General Accounting Office (GAO), has so far resulted in reduced rates and increased service quality. Meanwhile, reduced franchise obligations encourage new entrants and non subscribers to enter the video market resulting in a larger subscriber base that more than accounts for the lost fees of competitively reduced rates. In turn, the additional video providers and consumers bring in additional franchise fees and tax revenues while, at the same time, increasing demand for customer service and additional employees.

Among the characteristics that make articles such as this one so dangerous in the eyes of communications watch dog groups is the presentation of a persuasive argument clearly favoring unfettered deregulation and seemingly supported by a broad range of sources. Particularly, the Katz article cites research and opinions from the

GAO, several academic researchers associated with major universities, nonprofit organizations such as Consumers Union and the Cable Center, and the Washington consulting firm Criterion Economics, LLC. While the GAO reports do present a multiplicity of perspectives, the academic research is notably neutral, and Consumers Union is just that—a union of consumers and consumer advocates—further examination into the Web site content provided by the other two organizations is quite biased.

The Cable Center, which seems, from its home page, to be a nonprofit educational organization serving the development needs of journalism and telecommunications professionals, is actually a research front for cable networks, cable operators, industry associations, and vendors. Its stated mission is to bring “the great achievements of the cable telecommunications industry to the attention of the public” (“The story of the Cable Center,” 2007). While it isn’t exactly PBS, it does, at least, provide some level of research and resources to the industry that it serves, as well as the general public.

Criterion Economics, on the other hand, was neither a nonprofit organization nor an educational facility. In fact, Katz doesn’t even cite it in the body of her article; rather, the text refers only to the authors of the study while the company’s name is mentioned in a footnote formatted like a citation of an academic journal. However, if readers are motivated enough to follow the citation, they will find that Criterion, the study’s sponsor, is a Washington-based consulting firm with a client list that includes a range of telecommunications and energy utilities as well as government agencies such as the IRS, the Department of Justice, the Department of the Treasury, a United States

Attorney's office, and the EPA, among others.<sup>3</sup> The consulting group specializes in litigation, strategy, and public policy.

Based on an examination of Katz's resources, it seems that she is supporting the arguments of pro-deregulation groups and selectively citing only the pro-deregulation findings of otherwise objective sources. If a reader finds the resulting article sufficiently compelling to take action, a click on the organization's *Take Action* Web site will take him or her to a comprehensive list of Action Alerts that have already been mailed to FreedomWorks' members—among them is an Action Alert titled *Choose your cable in Ohio*. Visitors who click that link will be directed to a web form that supplies a message that may be sent to legislators either by email or as a printed letter. As discussed earlier, the visitor may edit the subject or message text and then must insert his or her name and contact information before sending this message to a pre-selected list of message recipients that cannot be altered. The recipient list for this particular action item, shown in Appendix C, includes Governor Ted Strickland, Lt. Governor Lee Fisher, Your State Upper Chamber Representatives, and Your State Lower Chamber Representatives.

### **The Progress and Freedom Foundation**

In contrast to FreedomWorks write-your-representative strategy, the Progress and Freedom Foundation (PFF) takes a more academic view acknowledging the necessary role that government regulation plays in society while taking note of government's "tendency is to reach beyond its legitimate functions in ways that harm consumers, burden citizens and slow progress" (Progress and Freedom Foundation,

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.criterioneconomics.com/clients> for a client list.

2007). According to its mission statement, PFF (2007) is “leading the intellectual battle for true deregulation of communications markets, including immediate deregulation of broadband services, and forbearance from regulation of wireless communications and the Internet.” However, it is still an industry interest group and earns support from telecommunications companies, broadcast networks, cellular companies, and professional telecommunications associations from a variety of countries.

Like FreedomWorks, the PFF Web site publishes articles analyzing the organization’s public policy perspective, including one titled *A Model to Analyze Costs and Benefits of Franchise Reform: What Would Reform Mean to Missourians?* by PFF research fellow Kent Lassman (2006). Unlike Katz, Lassman (2006) acknowledges the range of alternatives that exist in the cable franchise debate, specifically pointing to continued local franchising, implementation of state or federal franchising, or the elimination of franchising altogether; he includes cost estimates for state franchising in Missouri—the option he argues is the next step in the deregulation process.

Lassman’s article assumes the tone of a business proposition projecting the success of new entrants into Missouri’s multichannel video market by hypothesizing that new entrants into a proposed state-wide franchise system would gain market share proportional to Direct Broadcast Satellite’s (DBS) market gains between 2001 and 2004. He then devises a series of cost estimates that would be incurred by the state and by the franchise applicants if a state-wide franchise system were to be implemented for a three-year period. Lassman limits his estimate to that time period due to a general assumption of either an impending federal franchising regime or sufficient competition to allow the market to regulate itself within three years.

Lassman's approach is much more moderate than that of Katz in that he is proposing a gradual reformation of regulation from the local level, to the state, then possibly to the federal government, and finally to the marketplace itself. Lassman's style mirrors that of his organization, which is conservative in both opinions and in its approach to legislative change. Likewise, this Web site lacks the mobilization tools available from FreedomWorks, and in exchange, garners the credibility of a neutral, non-partisan research facility despite its very clear goal of complete deregulation in favor of a self-regulated market.

### **Frontiers of Freedom**

Alternatively, Frontiers of Freedom—the last of the three astroturf organizations—is not concerned with the societal or technological arguments for telecommunications deregulation. Instead, Frontiers of Freedom believes in strict interpretation of the Constitution and the imposition of limits on the size of government and the power that it may exert (Frontiers of Freedom, 2007). In line with that mission, the organization's Center for Economic Liberty and Property Rights—one of a variety of organizational centers dealing with varying aspects of Constitutional regulation—“is dedicated to protecting economic liberty and private property rights from excessive and unreasonable government regulation” (Frontiers of Freedom, 2007).

At the outset, Frontiers of Freedom seems to be a true grassroots organization that provides a forum for individuals interested in policy decisions and concerned about the over-extension of government. However, their membership page reveals a disproportionately strong tie to former Senator Wallop of Wyoming, indicating that members contributing at the \$1,000 level or above will be invited to a special retreat at Senator Wallop's ranch. Apparently, Frontiers of Freedom is to Senator Wallop what

FreedomWorks is to former House majority leader and current FreedomWorks chairman Dick Armey.

Much like Armey's FreedomWorks, Wallop's Frontiers of Freedom presents a one-sided argument for total deregulation that mirrors his congressional agenda, but it lacks FreedomWorks' pretense of scholarly studies from research institutions and think tanks. Instead, Frontiers of Freedom presents a weekly column by its president, George Landrith, who is credited as a "[recognized authority] on constitutional law and jurisprudence," although the Web site does not indicate who has recognized him as such (Frontiers of Freedom, 2007).

In his column, Landrith likens telecommunications regulation to New York City's 19<sup>th</sup> century traffic problems. He claims that the then-proposed regulation of horse-drawn carriages and their ensuing manure problem was made moot by the technological innovation of the automobile (Landrith, 2005, May 4). Similarly, Landrith (2005, May 4) believes that cable and telephone regulation can be averted thanks to the development of IPTV (Internet Protocol Television) and VOIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) service. He argues that IP technology is sufficiently cost-effective and widely available that the market can regulate itself, thus allowing all the benefits of increased consumer choice without any of the burdens of government regulation.

All three of the astroturf organizations mentioned above present arguments of varying strength for true deregulation. What remains unclear is whether their arguments align with public opinion, or, instead, with that of the organizations' financial supporters—including Armey, Wallop, and the industry groups with which they sympathize. Of the three organizations, the Progress and Freedom Foundation seems

to cater the most to the public interest, and is also the most transparent in terms of disclosing its supporters. Frontiers of Freedom makes no reference to the public interest on its Web site and fails to list any supporters or affiliates; although the homepage hosts an annual report link, the link is dead. Somewhere in the middle is FreedomWorks, which lists its supporters and makes reference to its support of the public interest, but does so in a one-sided and somewhat deceptive manner.

### **Research Questions**

Regardless of these organizations' abilities to serve the public interest, the true test of their effectiveness is their ability to influence the public policy agenda and public opinion. The parameters of this study do not allow the researcher to discover causal links between the communications products released by these three astroturf organizations and related stories and testimony in the news media and in the Senate. However, this study does allow the researcher to determine whether the message frames used by these organizations in their discussions of telecommunications deregulation are present in related news articles and Congressional testimony. As such, this study will identify the frequency with which these message frames appear and determine whether there is any relationship between the appearance of these message frames in news media and in statements made during Congressional hearings. Furthermore, this study will examine whether the communicators using these message frames are more likely to favor the deregulation of telecommunications or to oppose it.

It should be noted that other organizations may use these frames or competing frames in an effort to shape the debate about telecommunications deregulation. However, an examination of competing frames from other sources is beyond the scope of the present study. This study will limit its scope to these two communications

venues—print media and Congressional hearings—because members of the media and government representatives are two of the target audiences identified in the astroturf organizational literature. A content analysis of the frames present in these two sources will allow the researcher to determine whether they address the telecommunications deregulation debate within the same framework and to what extent their positions align with that of the astroturf organizations. Citizens and voters comprise the remaining target audience identified in the astroturf organizational literature, but, in the absence of content to analyze, a study of the impact of framing on this audience would require a survey methodology. As a result, an examination of the framing effects on this audience is also beyond the scope of the present study. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How frequently do message frames used by these astroturf organizations to discuss telecommunications deregulation appear in news articles?

RQ2: How frequently do message frames used by these astroturf organizations to discuss telecommunications deregulation appear in the record of Congressional hearings?

RQ3: Is there any correlation between the appearance of message frames in news articles and during Congressional hearings?

RQ4: Are communicators who support or oppose the deregulation of telecommunications more or less likely to use the same message frames as these astroturf organizations?

### CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

All three organizations studied here provide information for the press and the general public regarding the implications of deregulation, and all three seek to influence the media and to mobilize the public to influence their government representatives accordingly. However, there is no stated evidence on any of these organizations' Web

sites to support the effectiveness of their astroturf mobilization campaigns as opposed to traditional lobbying campaigns and the researcher did not find any extant scholarship regarding the effectiveness of these astroturf campaigns. For that reason, it would be helpful to explore the ways in which the astroturf organizations use message frames to influence audiences and whether their messages have been utilized by these audiences—particularly the media, legislators or industry experts testifying in front of Congress.

Therefore, for the purposes of the present study, the researcher read the position statements and press releases published by FreedomWorks, the Progress and Freedom Foundation, and Frontiers of Freedom to determine how these organizations framed messages related to the telecommunications deregulation debate. This brief review of the deregulation literature from the three organizations' Web sites was supposed to be a pilot study conducted with the goal of identifying message frames within statements directed at both the press and the general public that were published between January 1, 2005 and January 16, 2007. This specific time period was chosen because it represents a peak in the activity of these organizations' ongoing campaigns for full deregulation of telecommunications competition leading up to the FCC's January 16, 2007 deadline for formal public comments on the commission's 2006 Review of the Media Ownership Rules (Federal Communications Commission, 2006; FreedomWorks, 2007; Frontiers of Freedom, 2007; Progress and Freedom Foundation, 2007). During this time, the astroturf organizations studied here disseminated daily messages regarding telecommunications deregulation and the FCC's Media Ownership Rules. The rules under review at that time are specifically relevant to this study because they

all addressed ownership limits and bans that effectively prevented telecommunications companies from freely competing under the sole regulation of the market.

This would-be pilot study focused on the deregulation literature disseminated by these organizations with the intention of identifying a set of message frames that appeared consistently throughout organizational literature during the stated time period. After an examination of the three organizations' Web sites, the researcher identified a population of 127 opinion articles, open letters, press releases, and research studies that were written by organization members and employees and that were relevant to the telecommunications deregulation debate. The following list of message frames related to this issue emerged:

- Deregulation provides an economic benefit to taxpayers.
- Regulation threatens free market enterprise.
- Regulation wastes government/taxpayer financial resources.
- Regulators are responsible for necessitating that telecommunications companies transfer regulatory costs to consumers.
- Regulation is responsible for impeding technological growth.
- Regulation inhibits/limits consumer choice among telecommunications services.

The researcher intended to conduct a complete content analysis of the population of astroturf organizational literature. However, these documents were removed from the organizational Web sites after the FCC's 2006 Review of the Media Ownership Rules and before the researcher had the opportunity to conduct the full analysis.

Prior framing research has found that issue frames alone "are difficult to generalize, compare, or use as empirical evidence for theory building" (de Vreese, 2005). Therefore, in order to maintain the relevance of this study and to allow

comparisons with other message framing studies, these issue frames will be categorized under two commonly acknowledged generic frames—the economic consequences frame and the attribution of responsibility frame—that have been found, among others, to be consistently present throughout the framing literature (de Vreese, 2005; Neuman, et al., 1992; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Valkenburg, et al., 1999). The first three issue frames will be operationalized as sub-frames of the economic consequences generic frame; these issue frames include (1) deregulation provides an economic benefit to taxpayers, (2) regulation threatens free market enterprise, (3) regulation wastes government/taxpayer financial resources. The last three issue frames will be operationalized as sub-frames of the attribution of responsibility generic frame; these issue frames include (1) regulators are responsible for necessitating that telecommunications companies transfer regulatory costs to consumers, (2) regulation is responsible for impeding technological growth, (3) regulation inhibits/limits consumer choice among telecommunications services.

Once generic frames and issue frames were determined, the researcher developed a content analysis of media coverage and Congressional records related to the telecommunications deregulation debate during the stated time period. This analysis allowed the researcher to identify the presence of generic frames and issue frames in media coverage and Congressional records. The media portion of the analysis was limited to print news sources because, as Kiousis et al. (2006) articulated in their study on agenda-setting in print news, “prior research has found that news content across media outlets can be strikingly similar.” Thus, under the auspices of the present study, a sample of print news was selected by searching the LexisNexis

Academic database for news articles relating to telecommunications regulation/deregulation, media ownership, telecommunications competition, and net neutrality during the selected time period. The researcher did not control for the type of news source producing the articles and did not distinguish between mainstream and marginal news sources. However, the news sources included in the LexisNexis search results could all be categorized as mainstream newspapers, industry news outlets, and wire services.<sup>1</sup>

After the population of news articles was compiled, the articles were analyzed to determine whether the generic frames identified earlier—economics and attribution of responsibility—were present in the media. Then, to examine the presence of these message frames in statements made to and by members of Congress during the specified time period, a sample of legislative and policy documents was selected by searching the LexisNexis Congressional database to identify a population of policy documents relevant to this study. These documents were analyzed to determine whether the generic frames are present in statements made and testimony given during Congressional hearings.

In total, the researcher found 246 print news articles and 313 Congressional and FCC documents that are relevant to the research questions above and were published between January 1, 2005 and January 16, 2007. The researcher, along with two additional coders, analyzed the full population of news articles. However, the length of the legislative documents—most of which were records of Congressional hearings comprising statements made by twenty speakers or more—required that the coders limit

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<sup>1</sup> Refer to Tables 3-1 to 3-3 for a full list of news sources included in the news population.

their evaluation to a random sample of the Congressional population. Initially, the researcher intended to analyze 20% of the population of policy documents. Once each document was numbered, the researcher used the Social Psychology Network's Research Randomizer (Urbaniak & Plous, 2011) to identify the research sample. Then, each document that represented a record of a Congressional hearing was subdivided by speaker, which means that each statement or testimony contained within the hearing record was designated as a separate unit of analysis identified by the individual or individuals to which the text was attributed. However, the remaining sample was extensive and the researcher determined that a smaller sample would provide sufficient data for analysis. The Research Randomizer (Urbaniak & Plous, 2011) was used again to reduce the sample size to 16% (n=51). At the end of this process, the final Congressional sample, subdivided by speaker, included 378 separate statements. Each statement is considered to be an individual unit of analysis.

The total research sample of 624 news articles and statements made during Congressional hearings was divided among the three coders for review. Each coder was directed to use a standardized code sheet<sup>2</sup> to indicate the presence or absence of each frame and the valence, if applicable. Coders read each document, in its entirety, to determine whether the economic generic frame was present (1) or absent (2) and whether the attribution of responsibility generic frame was present (1) or absent (2). If the presence of a generic frame was detected, then the document was coded for the valence of the frame—whether the framed argument was against deregulation (3), neutral (4), or in favor of deregulation (5)—and for the presence (1) or absence (2) of

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix A for the code sheet and Appendix B for the code book used for this study.

each issue sub-frame and whether the issue sub-frame was against deregulation (3) or in favor of deregulation (5). Please note that astroturf organizations did not use neutral frames. In reviewing the message frames used by the astroturf organizations, the researcher only noted frames that favored deregulation. Due to this inherent bias, coders were instructed to identify issue frames that favored deregulation and were therefore consistent with the astroturf issue frames and issue frames that did not favor deregulation and therefore represented a null version of the initial issue frame. Researchers did not code for neutral issue frames because neutral frames were not present in the astroturf organizational literature, which, in retrospect, limits the conclusions that the researcher was able to draw from this study.

Following the intercoder reliability methods used by Kiousis et al.(2006), a randomly selected subsample of news articles and policy documents was isolated—again using the Social Psychology Network’s Research Randomizer (Urbaniak & Plous, 2011) —to verify intercoder reliability. At the beginning of the coding process, a reliability sample comprising 20% of the research sample was isolated, divided into three parts, and assigned to three reliability coders. One of the coders dropped out of the project prior to completing any work and the remaining two reliability coders participated in code book training sessions prior to analyzing their initial coding assignments. The remaining reliability sample included 13% (n=33) of the news population and 10% (n=41) of the units of analysis from the Congressional sample.

As in the study conducted by Kiousis et al. (2006), reliability was calculated using both Holsti’s formula and Scott’s pi (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). The full reliability sample of legislative documents was tested by one reliability coder and the reliability

sample of news documents was divided between two reliability coders. Each document in the reliability sample was also coded by the researcher. Separate reliability coefficients were then calculated using Holsti's formula for these three subsets of data—legislative documents analyzed by the researcher and reliability coder 1 (RC1), news documents analyzed by the researcher and RC1, and news document analyzed by the researcher and reliability coder 2 (RC2). Then, the reliability of each question on the code sheet was calculated for each reliability coder using Scott's pi.

Table 3-1. Newspapers included in the news population

| Source                                | Web Site  | Type              | # of Articles |
|---------------------------------------|---|-------------------|---------------|
| Atlanta Journal-Constitution          | <a href="http://www.ajc.com/">http://www.ajc.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 4             |
| Austin American-Statesman             | <a href="http://www.statesman.com/">http://www.statesman.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 6             |
| Bangor Daily News                     | <a href="http://new.bangordailynews.com/">http://new.bangordailynews.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 2             |
| Birmingham News                       | <a href="http://www.bhamnews.com/">http://www.bhamnews.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 2             |
| Boston Globe                          | <a href="http://www.boston.com/">http://www.boston.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 1             |
| Boston Herald                         | <a href="http://www.bostonherald.com/">http://www.bostonherald.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 1             |
| Buffalo News                          | <a href="http://www.buffalonews.com/">http://www.buffalonews.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 1             |
| Charleston Gazette                    | <a href="http://wvgazette.com/">http://wvgazette.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 1             |
| Chattanooga Times Free Press          | <a href="http://www.timesfreepress.com/">http://www.timesfreepress.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 1             |
| Chicago Tribune                       | <a href="http://www.chicagotribune.com/">http://www.chicagotribune.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 3             |
| Daily Iowan                           | <a href="http://www.dailyiowan.com/">http://www.dailyiowan.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 1             |
| Daily News, Ball State U.             | <a href="http://www.bsudailynews.com/">http://www.bsudailynews.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 1             |
| Daily Press (McClatchy-Tribune)       | <a href="http://www.vvdailypress.com/">http://www.vvdailypress.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 1             |
| Daily Texan                           | <a href="http://www.dailytexanonline.com/">http://www.dailytexanonline.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 1             |
| Denver Post                           | <a href="http://www.denverpost.com/">http://www.denverpost.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 2             |
| Fresno Bee                            | <a href="http://www.fresnobee.com/">http://www.fresnobee.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 1             |
| Grand Rapids Press                    | <a href="http://www.mlive.com/grpress/">http://www.mlive.com/grpress/</a>   | Newspaper         | 4             |
| Herald News                           | <a href="http://www.northjersey.com/">http://www.northjersey.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 1             |
| Houston Chronicle                     | <a href="http://www.chron.com/">http://www.chron.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 3             |
| Indianapolis Business Journal         | <a href="http://www.ibj.com/">http://www.ibj.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 3             |
| Intelligencer Journal                 | <a href="http://lancasteronline.com/">http://lancasteronline.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 1             |
| Journal Record                        | <a href="http://journalrecord.com/">http://journalrecord.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 2             |
| Kansas City Daily Record              | <a href="http://molawyersmedia.com">http://molawyersmedia.com</a>   | Newspaper         | 2             |
| Las Vegas Review-Journal              | <a href="http://www.lvrj.com/">http://www.lvrj.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 2             |
| Michigan Daily                        | <a href="http://www.michigandaily.com/">http://www.michigandaily.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 2             |
| Milwaukee Journal Sentinel            | <a href="http://www.jsonline.com/">http://www.jsonline.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 2             |
| Muskegon Chronicle                    | <a href="http://www.mlive.com/chronicle/">http://www.mlive.com/chronicle/</a>   | Newspaper         | 1             |
| National Journal, The (The HotLine)   | <a href="http://services.nationaljournal.com/hotline/">http://services.nationaljournal.com/hotline/</a>                     | Newspaper<br>Blog | 1             |
| New York Sun                          | <a href="http://www.nysun.com/">http://www.nysun.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 2             |
| New York Times                        | <a href="http://www.nytimes.com/">http://www.nytimes.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 13            |
| News-Sentinel (Knight/Ridder Tribune) | <a href="http://www.news-sentinel.com/">http://www.news-sentinel.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 1             |
| Philadelphia Inquirer                 | <a href="http://www.philly.com/">http://www.philly.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 6             |
| Pittsburgh Post-Gazette               | <a href="http://www.post-gazette.com/">http://www.post-gazette.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 1             |
| Press Enterprise                      | <a href="http://www.pe.com/">http://www.pe.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 1             |
| Pueblo Chieftain (McClatchy-Tribune)  | <a href="http://www.chieftain.com/">http://www.chieftain.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 1             |
| Record, The                           | <a href="http://www.northjersey.com/">http://www.northjersey.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 1             |
| Richmond Times Dispatch               | <a href="http://www2.timesdispatch.com/">http://www2.timesdispatch.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 3             |
| San Antonio Express-News              | <a href="http://www.mysanantonio.com/">http://www.mysanantonio.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 1             |
| Santa Fe New Mexican                  | <a href="http://www.santafenewmexican.com/">http://www.santafenewmexican.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 2             |
| Seattle Post-Intelligencer, The       | <a href="http://www.seattlepi.com/">http://www.seattlepi.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 1             |
| Seattle Times                         | <a href="http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/home/index.html">http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/home/index.html</a> | Newspaper         | 1             |
| Seattle Weekly                        | <a href="http://www.seattleweekly.com/">http://www.seattleweekly.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 1             |
| South Bend Tribune                    | <a href="http://www.southbendtribune.com/">http://www.southbendtribune.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 5             |
| St. Charles County Business Record    | <a href="http://molawyersmedia.com">http://molawyersmedia.com</a>   | Newspaper         | 1             |
| St. Petersburg Times                  | <a href="http://www.tampabay.com/">http://www.tampabay.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 2             |
| Star Tribune                          | <a href="http://www.startribune.com/">http://www.startribune.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 1             |
| State Journal-Register                | <a href="http://www.sj-r.com/">http://www.sj-r.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 2             |
| Telegraph Herald                      | <a href="http://www.thonline.com/">http://www.thonline.com/</a>   | Newspaper         | 2             |

Table 3-1. Continued

| Source                | Web Site  | Type      | # of Articles |
|-----------------------|---|-----------|---------------|
| Tulsa World           | <a href="http://www.tulsaworld.com/">http://www.tulsaworld.com/</a>           | Newspaper | 6             |
| USA Today             | <a href="http://www.usatoday.com/">http://www.usatoday.com/</a>               | Newspaper | 3             |
| Virginian-Pilot       | <a href="http://thevirginianpilot.com/">http://thevirginianpilot.com/</a>     | Newspaper | 1             |
| Washington Post       | <a href="http://www.washingtonpost.com/">http://www.washingtonpost.com/</a>   | Newspaper | 7             |
| Washington Times      | <a href="http://www.washingtontimes.com/">http://www.washingtontimes.com/</a> | Newspaper | 4             |
| Winston-Salem Journal | <a href="http://www2.journalnow.com/">http://www2.journalnow.com/</a>         | Newspaper | 1             |
| Wyoming Tribune-Eagle | <a href="http://www.wyomingnews.com/">http://www.wyomingnews.com/</a>         | Newspaper | 1             |

Table 3-2. Industry news sources included in the news population

| Source                         | Web Site  | Type                               | # of Articles |
|--------------------------------|---|------------------------------------|---------------|
| Crain's Chicago Business       | <a href="http://www.chicagobusiness.com/">http://www.chicagobusiness.com/</a>     | Industry News, Business            | 1             |
| Crain's Detroit Business       | <a href="http://www.crainsdetroit.com/">http://www.crainsdetroit.com/</a>         | Industry News, Business            | 3             |
| Daily Deal/The Deal            | <a href="http://www.TheDeal.com">http://www.TheDeal.com</a>                       | Industry News, Finance             | 17            |
| Investor's Business Daily      | <a href="http://www.investors.com/">http://www.investors.com/</a>                 | Industry News, Finance             | 1             |
| Metropolitan Corporate Counsel | <a href="http://www.metrocorpcounsel.com/">http://www.metrocorpcounsel.com/</a>   | Industry News, Law                 | 1             |
| Network World                  | <a href="http://www.networkworld.com/">http://www.networkworld.com/</a>           | Industry News, Telecommunications  | 1             |
| RCR Wireless News              | <a href="http://www.rcrwireless.com/">http://www.rcrwireless.com/</a>             | Industry News, Wireless Technology | 2             |
| Roll Call                      | <a href="http://www.rollcall.com/">http://www.rollcall.com/</a>                   | Industry News, Politics            | 1             |
| Tech News                      | <a href="http://www.technews.org/">http://www.technews.org/</a>                   | Industry News, Technology          | 2             |
| Television Week                | <a href="http://www.tvweek.com/">http://www.tvweek.com/</a>                       | Industry News, TV                  | 7             |
| The Hill                       | <a href="http://thehill.com/">http://thehill.com/</a>                             | Industry News, Politics            | 1             |
| The Hollywood Reporter         | <a href="http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/">http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/</a> | Industry News, Entertainment       | 15            |
| Variety                        | <a href="http://www.variety.com">http://www.variety.com</a>                       | Industry News, Entertainment       | 4             |

Table 3-3. Wire services included in the news population

| Source                   | Web Site  | Type         | # of Articles |
|--------------------------|---|--------------|---------------|
| Associated Press         | <a href="http://www.ap.org/">http://www.ap.org/</a>   | Wire Service | 30            |
| Business Wire            | <a href="http://www.businesswire.com">http://www.businesswire.com</a>                                   | Wire Service | 1             |
| Copley News Service      | <a href="http://www.copleynews.com">www.copleynews.com</a>  | Wire Service | 2             |
| Cox News Service         | <a href="http://www.coxmediagroup.com/about/">http://www.coxmediagroup.com/about/</a>                   | Wire Service | 8             |
| Market Wire              | <a href="http://www.marketwire.com/">http://www.marketwire.com/</a>                                     | Wire Service | 1             |
| PR Newswire US           | <a href="http://www.prnewswire.com">http://www.prnewswire.com</a>                                       | Wire Service | 17            |
| States News Service      | Not Found   | Wire Service | 1             |
| The Frontrunner          | <a href="http://www.bulletinnews.com/frontrunner.aspx">http://www.bulletinnews.com/frontrunner.aspx</a> | Wire Service | 1             |
| The White House Bulletin | <a href="http://www.bulletinnews.com/">http://www.bulletinnews.com/</a>                                 | Wire Service | 2             |
| UPI                      | <a href="http://www.upi.com/">http://www.upi.com/</a>   | Wire Service | 3             |

## CHAPTER 4 RESULTS

After several training sessions over the course of one academic semester, coders reached a reliability coefficient of .70 or above or demonstrated 100% agreement, and the researcher proceeded to analyze the remaining sample.<sup>1</sup> At the conclusion of this analysis, the resulting raw data was uploaded into SPSS to analyze the frequency with which the message frames in this study appeared in the research sample and whether there was a significant relationship between the valence of each document and the use of the issue frames noted above. Then, the data was aggregated, and the researcher used Spearman's rho to identify correlations between the presence of message frames in policy documents and the news media ( $r=0.868$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). Finally, the researcher intended to test for correlations between the valence of each document and the generic and issue frames used. However, message frames were not present with sufficient frequency to conduct any statistical analysis and no significant correlation could be determined.

### **Intercoder Reliability**

In order to determine intercoder reliability, the researcher analyzed several sets of reliability data. The first set of reliability data included the 49 legislative documents analyzed by the researcher and RC1. Each coder answered 12 questions relating to each article, creating 588 potential agreements. When applying Holsti's formula to the legislative documents analyzed by the researcher and RC1, a 95% agreement was found between the two coders [ $R=2(557)/1176=0.95$ ].<sup>2</sup> The percentage of agreement

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<sup>1</sup> Refer to Tables 4-1 to 4-4 for reliability coefficients.

<sup>2</sup> Refer to Table 4-1.

between the researcher and RC1 was calculated for each message frame on the code sheet as well as for the valence of the generic message frames and the reliability of each of these items was tested using Scott's pi.<sup>3</sup> This additional reliability test was conducted in order to calculate reliability beyond that which is expected by chance (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). The researcher calculated separate coefficients for each message frame on the code sheet as well as the valence of the generic message frames to ensure that the reliability for each of these items would be considered acceptable. The following items were tested: the economic generic frame (88% agreement,  $\pi[1]=0.7216$ ), the valence of the economic generic frame (98% agreement,  $\pi[1A]=0.9533$ ), the economic benefit to taxpayers issue frame (100% agreement,  $\pi[1B]=0$ ), the threat to free market enterprise issue frame (96% agreement,  $\pi[1C]=0.7833$ ), the waste of government/taxpayer financial resources issue frame (100% agreement,  $\pi[1D]=0$ ), the attribution of responsibility generic frame (96% agreement,  $\pi[2]=0.9181$ ), the valence of the attribution of responsibility generic frame (92% agreement,  $\pi[2A]=0.8511$ ), the transfer of regulatory costs to consumers issue frame (98% agreement,  $\pi[2B]=0.8478$ ), the impeding technological growth issue frame (92% agreement,  $\pi[2C]=0.7134$ ), and the inhibiting/limiting consumer choice issue frame (98% agreement,  $\pi[2D]=0.9384$ ).<sup>4</sup>

The second set of reliability data included the 18 news documents analyzed by the researcher and RC1. Again, each coder answered 12 questions relating to each article, creating 216 potential agreements. When applying Holsti's formula to the news

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<sup>3</sup> Refer to Table 4-2.

<sup>4</sup> In each instance where the coefficient for Scott's pi equals 0, coders were in exact agreement, but the values for observed and expected agreement were the same.

documents analyzed by the researcher and RC1, a 99% agreement was found between the two coders [ $R = 2(213)/432 = 0.99$ ].<sup>5</sup> Then, separate coefficients for each message frame on the code sheet and for the valence of the generic message frames were calculated again using Scott's pi.<sup>6</sup> The following items were tested: the economic generic frame (94% agreement,  $\text{pi}[1] = 0.8517$ ), the valence of the economic generic frame (100% agreement,  $\text{pi}[1A] = 1$ ), the economic benefit to taxpayers issue frame (100% agreement,  $\text{pi}[1B] = 1$ ), the threat to free market enterprise issue frame (100% agreement,  $\text{pi}[1C] = 1$ ), the waste of government/taxpayer financial resources issue frame (100% agreement,  $\text{pi}[1D] = 1$ ), the attribution of responsibility generic frame (94% agreement,  $\text{pi}[2] = 0.8225$ ), the valence of the attribution of responsibility generic frame (94% agreement,  $\text{pi}[2A] = 0.8225$ ), the transfer of regulatory costs to consumers issue frame (100% agreement,  $\text{pi}[2B] = 0$ ), the impeding technological growth issue frame (100% agreement,  $\text{pi}[2C] = 1$ ), and the inhibiting/limiting consumer choice issue frame (100% agreement,  $\text{pi}[2D] = 1$ ).

The third set of reliability data included the 15 news documents analyzed by the researcher and RC2. Again, each coder answered 12 questions relating to each article, creating 180 potential agreements. When applying Holsti's formula to the news documents analyzed by the researcher and RC2, a 97% agreement was found between the two coders [ $R = 2(175)/360 = 0.97$ ].<sup>7</sup> Then, separate coefficients for each message frame on the code sheet as well as the valence of the generic message frames were

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<sup>5</sup> Refer to Table 4-1.

<sup>6</sup> Refer to Tables 4-3.

<sup>7</sup> Refer to Table 4-1.

calculated using Scott's pi.<sup>8</sup> The following items were tested: the economic generic frame (93% agreement,  $\pi[1]=0.8136$ ), the valence of the economic generic frame (100% agreement,  $\pi[1A]=0$ ), the economic benefit to taxpayers issue frame (100% agreement,  $\pi[1B]=0$ ), the threat to free market enterprise issue frame (100% agreement,  $\pi[1C]=0$ ), the waste of government/taxpayer financial resources issue frame (100% agreement,  $\pi[1D]=0$ ), the attribution of responsibility generic frame (87% agreement,  $\pi[2]=0.7322$ ), the valence of the attribution of responsibility generic frame (93% agreement,  $\pi[2A]=0.8245$ ), the transfer of regulatory costs to consumers issue frame (100% agreement,  $\pi[2B]=0$ ), the impeding technological growth issue frame (100% agreement,  $\pi[2C]=0$ ), and the inhibiting/limiting consumer choice issue frame (93% agreement,  $\pi[2D]=0.7599$ ).

### **Results of the Full Sample**

The full sample included 246 news articles and 378 statements made during Congressional hearings. In cases where two coders analyzed the same document, the data collected by the primary researcher was used in the analysis. The first research question asked: How frequently do message frames used by these astroturf organizations to discuss telecommunications deregulation appear in news articles? And the second research question asked: How frequently do message frames used by these astroturf organizations to discuss telecommunications deregulation appear in the record of Congressional hearings? Table 4-5 reports the frequency with which the two generic frames and six issue frames used by FreedomWorks, the Progress and Freedom Foundation, and Frontiers of Freedom's Center for Economic Liberty and

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<sup>8</sup> Refer to Table 4-4.

Property Rights to discuss telecommunications deregulation appear in news articles—RQ1—and the frequency with which these frames appear in records of Congressional hearings—RQ2.

Table 4-5 reports that the Economic Consequences generic frame was present in 24% (n=59) of the news population and 26% (n=98) of the Congressional sample. However, the economic issue frames used specifically by the astroturf organizations studied here appeared much less frequently than the Economic Consequences generic frame. The economic benefit to taxpayers issue frame was not present at all in the news population (n=0), but was present in 0.8% (n=3) of the Congressional sample. The threat to free market enterprise issue frame was present in 1% (n=3) of the news population and 4% (n=16) of the Congressional sample. The waste of government/taxpayer financial resources issue frame was present in 0.4% (n=1) of the news population and 0.3% (n=1) of the Congressional sample.

Moving on to the next set of frames, Table 4-5 also reports that the Attribution of Responsibility generic frame was present in 15% (n=38) of the news population and 31% (n=116) of the Congressional sample. Again, though, the issue frames related to the attribution of responsibility generic frame appeared much less frequently than the related generic frame. The issue frame attributing responsibility to regulators for necessitating that telecommunications companies transfer regulatory costs to consumers was not present at all in the news population (n=0), but was present in 1% (n=5) of the Congressional sample. The issue frame attributing responsibility to regulation for impeding technological growth was present in 0.4% (n=1) of the news population and 3% (n=13) of the Congressional sample. The issue frame attributing

responsibility to regulation for inhibiting/limiting consumer choice among telecommunications services was present in 3% (n=8) of the news population and 6% (n=21) of the Congressional sample.

The third research question asked: Is there any correlation between the appearance of message frames in news articles and during Congressional hearings? Further analysis, using a Spearman's rho correlation test in PASW Statistics 18, indicated that there is a statistically significant correlation between the presence or absence of these message frames in news articles and the presence or absence of these frames in statements and testimony included in the Congressional record. This correlation ( $\rho=0.868$ ), which is reported in Table 4-6, is significant at the 0.01 level ( $p<0.01$ ).

The fourth research question asked: Are communicators who support or oppose the deregulation of telecommunications more or less likely to use the same message frames as these astroturf organizations? In order to answer this question, the researcher intended to conduct a chi square analysis to determine whether a relationship exists between the overall valence of an article, statement, or testimony—whether or not the article favored deregulation—and the presence or absence of each message frame. However, there was not enough statistical variance in the sample to produce significant results and, therefore, no relationship could be determined. Instead, Tables 4-7 to 4-18 report the frequency with which frames were present in documents with positive, neutral, or negative valence.

Please note that, valence was only coded for a document if one or both of the generic frames were present. This methodology was used because the issue frames

were operationalized as sub-frames of the generic frames. Therefore an issue frame could only be present if the associated generic frame was also present. Furthermore, issue frames, as identified in the astroturf organizational literature, intrinsically contained valence in favor of deregulation. Although, in order to obtain a larger picture of the use of these frames, the coders searched for both the presence of the frames as they appeared in the astroturf organizational literature, and the null frames—messages that were framed the same way but with an opposite valence—which took a stance against deregulation. Thus, every time an issue frame was coded as present in a document, the frame was also indicated to be positive—in favor of deregulation—or negative—against deregulation—but never neutral. It was, however, possible for the overall tone of an article containing one or both generic frames to be positive, negative, or neutral, regardless of the presence or absence of issue frames.

Thus, in attempting to identify a relationship between article valence and the presence or absence of issue frames, the researcher isolated the documents within the sample that included either generic frame. Four sub-sets of documents emerged. The first set included documents from the news population in which the Economic Consequences generic frame was present (n=59).<sup>9</sup> The second set included documents from the Congressional sample in which the Economic Consequences generic frame was present (n=98).<sup>10</sup> The third set included documents from the news population in which the Attribution of Responsibility generic frame was present (n=38).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Refer to Tables 4-7, 4-8, and 4-9.

<sup>10</sup> Refer to Tables 4-10, 4-11, and 4-12.

<sup>11</sup> Refer to Tables 4-13, 4-14, and 4-15.

The fourth set included documents from the Congressional sample in which the Attribution of Responsibility generic frame was present (n=116).<sup>12</sup>

Of the 59 documents in the news population in which the Economic Consequences generic frame was found to be present, 4 documents exhibited a negative valence and took a stance against deregulation, 48 documents were neutral, and 7 documents exhibited a positive valence and favored deregulation. None of these articles contained the economic benefit to taxpayers issue frame. Three articles contained the threat to free market enterprise issue frame; 1 of these articles exhibited a negative valence and 2 of these articles exhibited a positive valence. One article contained the waste of government/taxpayer financial resources issue frame and it exhibited a positive valence. The frequency with which the economic issue frames were present in the news population and the valence of these frames are presented in Tables 4-7, 4-8, and 4-9.

Of the 98 documents in the Congressional sample in which the Economic Consequences generic frame was found to be present, 28 documents exhibited a negative valence and took a stance against deregulation, 52 documents were neutral, and 18 documents exhibited a positive valence and favored deregulation. Three of these documents contained the economic benefit to taxpayers issue frame; 1 of these documents exhibited a negative valence and 2 of these documents exhibited a positive valence. Sixteen of these documents contained the threat to free market enterprise issue frame; 9 of these documents exhibited a negative valence and 16 of these documents exhibited a positive valence. One document contained the waste of

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<sup>12</sup> Refer to Tables 4-16, 4-17, and 4-18.

government/taxpayer financial resources issue frame and it exhibited a positive valence. The frequency with which the economic issue frames were present in the Congressional sample and the valence of these frames are presented in Tables 4-10, 4-11, and 4-12.

Of the 38 articles in the news population in which the Attribution of Responsibility generic frame was found to be present, 18 articles exhibited a negative valence and took a stance against deregulation, 11 articles were neutral, and 9 articles exhibited a positive valence and favored deregulation. None of these articles contained the transfer of regulatory costs to consumers issue frame. One article contained the impeding technological growth issue frame and this article exhibited a positive valence. Eight articles contained the inhibiting/limiting consumer choice issue frame; 5 of these articles exhibited a negative valence and 3 of these articles exhibited a positive valence. The frequency with which the attribution of responsibility issue frames were present in the news population and the valence of these frames are presented in the Tables 4-13, 4-14, and 4-15.

Of the 116 documents in the Congressional sample in which the Attribution of Responsibility generic frame was found to be present, 34 documents exhibited a negative valence and took a stance against deregulation, 62 documents were neutral, and 20 documents exhibited a positive valence and favored deregulation. Five documents contained the transfer of regulatory costs to consumers issue frame; 2 of these documents exhibited a negative valence and 3 of these documents exhibited a positive valence. Twelve documents contained the impeding technological growth issue frame; 4 of these documents exhibited a negative valence and 8 of these documents exhibited a positive valence. Twenty-one documents contained the inhibiting/limiting

consumer choice issue frame; 11 of these documents exhibited a negative valence and 10 of these documents exhibited a positive valence. The frequency with which the attribution of responsibility issue frames were present in the Congressional sample and the valence of these frames are presented in Tables 4-16, 4-17, and 4-18.

Based on this data, none of the message frames were present with sufficient frequency to produce statistically significant results. Therefore, this study cannot determine whether a relationship exists between the valence of an article and the presence or absence of the issue frames studied here.

Table 4-1. Holsti's reliability coefficient

| Reliability Sample     | Potential Agreements | Actual Agreements | Reliability Coefficient |
|------------------------|----------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| RC1<br>(Congressional) | 588                  | 557               | R=0.95                  |
| RC1 (News)             | 216                  | 213               | R=0.99                  |
| RC2 (News only)        | 180                  | 175               | R=0.97                  |

Table 4-2. Scott's pi; RC1 (Congressional sample)

| Code Sheet # | Observed Agreement | Expected Agreement | Reliability Coefficient |
|--------------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| 1            | 0.8776             | 0.5603             | p=0.7216                |
| 1A           | 0.9796             | 0.5633             | p=0.9533                |
| 1B           | 1                  | 1                  | p=0                     |
| 1C           | 0.9492             | 0.8117             | p=0.7833                |
| 1D           | 1                  | 1                  | p=0                     |
| 2            | 0.9592             | 0.5018             | p=0.9181                |
| 2A           | 0.9184             | 0.4519             | p=0.8511                |
| 2B           | 0.9796             | 0.8660             | p=0.8478                |
| 2C           | 0.9184             | 0.7153             | p=0.7134                |
| 2D           | 0.9796             | 0.6686             | p=0.9384                |

Table 4-3. Scott's pi; RC1 (news population)

| Code Sheet # | Observed Agreement | Expected Agreement | Reliability Coefficient |
|--------------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| 1            | 0.9444             | 0.6250             | p=0.8517                |
| 1A           | 1                  | 0.8024             | p=1                     |
| 1B           | 1                  | 0.9460             | p=1                     |
| 1C           | 1                  | 0.8951             | p=1                     |
| 1D           | 1                  | 0.8951             | p=1                     |
| 2            | 0.9444             | 0.6867             | p=0.8225                |
| 2A           | 0.9444             | 0.6867             | p=0.8225                |
| 2B           | 1                  | 1                  | p=0                     |
| 2C           | 1                  | 0.8951             | p=1                     |
| 2D           | 1                  | 0.8951             | p=1                     |

Table 4-4. Scott's pi; RC2 (news population only)

|    | Observed Agreement | Expected Agreement | Reliability Coefficient |
|----|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| 1  | 0.9333             | 0.6422             | p=0.8136                |
| 1A | 1                  | 1                  | p=0                     |
| 1B | 1                  | 1                  | p=0                     |
| 1C | 1                  | 1                  | p=0                     |
| 1D | 1                  | 1                  | p=0                     |
| 2  | 0.8667             | 0.5022             | p=0.7322                |
| 2A | 0.9333             | 0.6200             | p=0.8245                |
| 2B | 1                  | 1                  | p=0                     |
| 2C | 1                  | 1                  | p=0                     |
| 2D | 0.9333             | 0.7222             | p=0.7599                |

Table 4-5. Frequency of message frames in the sample

| Frame:  | Frequency of Frame in News Articles (RQ1): |      | Frequency of Frame in Congressional Records (RQ2): |       |
|---|--|------|--|-------|
| Economic consequences generic frame   | 24%  | n=59 | 26%  | n=98  |
| Deregulation provides/does not provide an economic benefit to taxpayers   | 0%   | n=0  | 0.8%   | n=3   |
| Regulation threatens/ does not threaten free market enterprise  | 1%   | n=3  | 4%   | n=16  |
| Regulation wastes/does not waste government or taxpayer financial resources   | 0.4%                                       | n=1  | 0.3%   | n=1   |
| Attribution of responsibility generic frame   | 15%  | n=38 | 31%  | n=116 |
| Regulators are/are not responsible for necessitating that telecommunications companies transfer regulatory costs to consumers | 0%   | n=0  | 1%   | n=5   |
| Regulation is/is not responsible for impeding technological growth  | 0.4%                                       | n=1  | 3%   | n=13  |
| Regulation does/does not inhibit or limit consumer choice among telecommunications services                                   | 3%   | n=18 | 6%   | n=21  |

Table 4-6. Correlation between frames present in the news population and the Congressional sample

|                       |                         | News Articles | Congressional Records |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|---------------|-----------------------|
| News Articles         | Correlation Coefficient | 1.000         | .868                  |
|                       | Sig. (2-tailed)         |               | .005                  |
|                       | N                       | 8             | 8                     |
| Congressional Records | Correlation Coefficient | .868          | 1.000                 |
|                       | Sig. (2-tailed)         | .005          |                       |
|                       | N                       | 8             | 8                     |

Table 4-7. Economic benefit to taxpayers (news population)

|         | Negative –<br>Against<br>Deregulation | Neutral | Positive –<br>Favors<br>Deregulation | Total |
|---------|---------------------------------------|---------|--------------------------------------|-------|
| Present | 0                                     | 0       | 0                                    | 0     |
| Absent  | 4                                     | 48      | 7                                    | 59    |
| Total   | 4                                     | 48      | 7                                    | 59    |

Table 4-8. Threat to free market enterprise (news population)

|         | Negative –<br>Against<br>Deregulation | Neutral | Positive –<br>Favors<br>Deregulation | Total |
|---------|---------------------------------------|---------|--------------------------------------|-------|
| Present | 1                                     | 0       | 2                                    | 3     |
| Absent  | 3                                     | 48      | 5                                    | 56    |
| Total   | 4                                     | 48      | 7                                    | 59    |

Table 4-9. Waste of government/taxpayer financial resources (news population)

|         | Negative –<br>Against<br>Deregulation | Neutral | Positive –<br>Favors<br>Deregulation | Total |
|---------|---------------------------------------|---------|--------------------------------------|-------|
| Present | 0                                     | 0       | 1                                    | 1     |
| Absent  | 4                                     | 48      | 6                                    | 58    |
| Total   | 4                                     | 48      | 7                                    | 59    |

Table 4-10. Economic benefit to taxpayers (Congressional sample)

|         | Negative –<br>Against<br>Deregulation | Neutral | Positive –<br>Favors<br>Deregulation | Total |
|---------|---------------------------------------|---------|--------------------------------------|-------|
| Present | 1                                     | 0       | 2                                    | 3     |
| Absent  | 27                                    | 52      | 16                                   | 95    |
| Total   | 28                                    | 52      | 18                                   | 98    |

Table 4-11. Threat to free market enterprise (Congressional sample)

|         | Negative –<br>Against<br>Deregulation | Neutral | Positive –<br>Favors<br>Deregulation | Total |
|---------|---------------------------------------|---------|--------------------------------------|-------|
| Present | 9                                     | 0       | 7                                    | 16    |
| Absent  | 19                                    | 52      | 11                                   | 82    |
| Total   | 28                                    | 52      | 18                                   | 98    |

Table 4-12. Waste of government/taxpayer financial resources (Congressional sample)

|         | Negative –<br>Against<br>Deregulation | Neutral | Positive –<br>Favors<br>Deregulation | Total |
|---------|---------------------------------------|---------|--------------------------------------|-------|
| Present | 0                                     | 0       | 1                                    | 1     |
| Absent  | 28                                    | 52      | 17                                   | 97    |
| Total   | 28                                    | 52      | 18                                   | 98    |

Table 4-13. Transfer of regulatory costs to consumers (news population)

|         | Negative –<br>Against<br>Deregulation | Neutral | Positive –<br>Favors<br>Deregulation | Total |
|---------|---------------------------------------|---------|--------------------------------------|-------|
| Present | 0                                     | 0       | 0                                    | 0     |
| Absent  | 18                                    | 11      | 9                                    | 38    |
| Total   | 18                                    | 11      | 9                                    | 38    |

Table 4-14. Impeding technological growth (news population)

|         | Negative –<br>Against<br>Deregulation | Neutral | Positive –<br>Favors<br>Deregulation | Total |
|---------|---------------------------------------|---------|--------------------------------------|-------|
| Present | 0                                     | 0       | 1                                    | 1     |
| Absent  | 18                                    | 11      | 8                                    | 37    |
| Total   | 18                                    | 11      | 9                                    | 38    |

Table 4-15. Inhibiting/limiting consumer choice (news population)

|         | Negative –<br>Against<br>Deregulation | Neutral | Positive –<br>Favors<br>Deregulation | Total |
|---------|---------------------------------------|---------|--------------------------------------|-------|
| Present | 5                                     | 0       | 3                                    | 8     |
| Absent  | 13                                    | 11      | 6                                    | 30    |
| Total   | 18                                    | 11      | 9                                    | 38    |

Table 4-16. Transfer of regulatory costs to consumers (Congressional sample)

|         | Negative –<br>Against<br>Deregulation | Neutral | Positive –<br>Favors<br>Deregulation | Total |
|---------|---------------------------------------|---------|--------------------------------------|-------|
| Present | 2                                     | 0       | 3                                    | 5     |
| Absent  | 32                                    | 62      | 17                                   | 111   |
| Total   | 34                                    | 62      | 20                                   | 116   |

Table 4-17. Impeding technological growth (Congressional sample)

|         | Negative –<br>Against<br>Deregulation | Neutral | Positive –<br>Favors<br>Deregulation | Total |
|---------|---------------------------------------|---------|--------------------------------------|-------|
| Present | 4                                     | 0       | 8                                    | 12    |
| Absent  | 30                                    | 62      | 12                                   | 104   |
| Total   | 34                                    | 62      | 20                                   | 116   |

Table 4-18. Inhibiting/limiting consumer choice (Congressional sample)

|         | Negative –<br>Against<br>Deregulation | Neutral | Positive –<br>Favors<br>Deregulation | Total |
|---------|---------------------------------------|---------|--------------------------------------|-------|
| Present | 11                                    | 0       | 10                                   | 21    |
| Absent  | 23                                    | 62      | 10                                   | 95    |
| Total   | 34                                    | 62      | 20                                   | 116   |

## CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

Initially, the purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of astroturf mobilization campaigns and the messages that they use. However, before analyzing such a broad topic, it seemed pertinent to identify a single issue—telecommunications deregulation—and to seek a better understanding of the way in which astroturf organizations frame their messages about this issue and whether these organizations frame messages the same way as other speakers who actively debate the same issue.

Therefore, the current study examined the frequency with which message frames used by astroturf organizations were present in print news articles relevant to this issue and the frequency with which these frames were present in statements made during Congressional hearings about this issue. Once that information had been gathered, the researcher was able to determine whether or not there is any relationship between astroturf messages and mainstream messages relating to telecommunications deregulation, whether there is any relationship between messages from the media and messages in the Congressional hearing record, and whether there is any relationship between a communicator's stance about this issue and the way in which the communicator chooses to frame the message.

### **Review of Research Questions**

In order to complete that task, the researcher posed four research questions. The first research question asked: How frequently do message frames used by these astroturf organizations to discuss telecommunications deregulation appear in news articles? After a content analysis of generic and issue frames used by the organizations mentioned above, this study found that the Economic Consequences generic frame was

present in 24% (n=59) of the news articles and the Attribution of Responsibility generic frame was present in 15% (n=38) of the news articles. The issue frames, however, were present with much less frequency. Two of the issue frames—Economic Benefit to Taxpayers and Transferring Regulatory Costs to Consumers—were not present in the news population at all. The remaining issue frames were present in 1% or less of the population.

The second research question asked: How frequently do message frames used by these astroturf organizations to discuss telecommunications deregulation appear in Congressional testimony? Again, this study found that the generic frames were present much more frequently than the issue frames. The Economic Consequences generic frame was present in 26% (n=98) of the Congressional sample and the Attribution of Responsibility generic frame was present in 31% (n=116) of the Congressional sample. Once more, the presence of issue frames in this sample was low—with frequency ranging from 0.3% - 6% of the sample. This data indicates that the message frames used by astroturf organizations are generally not used by the news media or in statements made by industry experts, scholars, or members of Congress during Congressional hearings.

The third research question asked: Is there any correlation between the appearance of message frames in news articles and during Congressional hearings? While this question does not directly address the purpose of this study—which was to determine a relationship between astroturf messages and messages in mainstream communications venues rather than that between news and Congressional messages—it does provide some insight into the broader telecommunications deregulation debate.

In answering this question, the researcher hoped to gain some insight as to whether the frames used by industry experts, legislators, and the media were random or whether there was some common language among speakers in the debate. This data indicates that, although all of these communicators are discussing the same issue, astroturf communicators choose to frame their messages differently than journalists, politicians, and industry experts. However, the latter three groups do demonstrate a similar use of the frames studied here. Based on the data gathered, there is a statistically significant correlation between frame presence in the news population and frame presence in the Congressional sample ( $p=0.868$ ). However, it should be noted that this finding does not imply any causal relationships between sources; it simply indicates that some relationship exists and provides a foundation for future research into the extent and nature of that relationship.

Finally, the fourth research question asks: Are communicators who support or oppose the deregulation of telecommunications more or less likely to use the same message frames as these astroturf organizations? There were 71 incidents of issue frame use throughout both samples, usually with multiple incidents per document. Thirty-eight of these incidents occurred in documents with a positive valence—favoring deregulation—and 33 of these incidents occurred in documents with a negative valence—against deregulation. Thus, anecdotally, it does not appear as though the valence of the documents examined has any relationship to the presence or absence of the issue frames. However, none of the issue frames were present with sufficient frequency to produce statistically significant results. Therefore, the present study

cannot support the existence of a relationship between the valence of an article and the presence or absence of the issue frames studied here.

### **Theoretical and Practical Implications**

In summary, this research indicates that astroturf organizations frame their messages quite differently than other organizational communicators. The message frames used by these astroturf organizations suggest that they hold the government responsible for the economic consequences of telecommunications regulation and that government is responsible for resolving these consequences through deregulation of the industry. However, journalists, legislators, and industry experts frame their messages in a much more neutral way. On the whole, journalists, legislators, and industry experts don't seem attribute responsibility for negative economic consequences to any single individual or entity and they don't identify the same economic consequences as the astroturf organizations. As such, one might conclude that, during the time frame studied here, these astroturf organizations were not successful in influencing anyone outside of their own membership base and that the members of astroturf organizations don't seem to have been successful in influencing their government representatives. In other words, the astroturf message frames examined in this study failed to shape the inferences that individuals—in this case, journalists, politicians, and industry experts—made about telecommunications deregulation (Hallahan, 1999; Reese, 2007).

From a theoretical perspective, this study supports earlier research indicating that the use of heuristics—rather than systematic information processing—is negatively correlated with the strength of an audience's beliefs and attitudes, as well as the endurance of the message (Chaiken & Maheswaran, 1994; Griffin, et al., 2002; Meyers-

Levy & Maheswaran, 2004; Pfau & Wan, 2006). While the calculated use of two-way asymmetrical communication, heuristic message processing, and interpersonal compliance strategies may seem like an appropriate means of advocacy given the goals of these organizations, this approach did not provide a strong enough message to mobilize the target audiences—including politicians, industry experts, and the media—to advocate for policies that aligned with astroturf organizational objectives.

Furthermore, by failing to provide any meaningful avenue for members to respond to astroturf messages or to participate in the process of message construction, astroturf communicators cannot be sure that they are addressing the real—versus perceived—needs of their membership base. If a critical mass of members should decide to process astroturf messages systematically and find that their true needs were not being met, it is plausible that the target audience would revert to their prior attitudes and behaviors or develop new attitudes and behaviors that are contrary to the interests of the astroturf organization. Since these organizations have not been influential in the media or legislative arenas, the researcher questions their level of influence among their own membership base and hypothesizes that the use of this type of communication may not be able to provide sustainable attitude or behavior change unless members are offered an opportunity for greater participation in the development of organizational messages.

Alternatively, a participatory approach utilizing two-way symmetrical communication would be sustainable because, by participating in the astroturf communication process, publics can help shape messages. By doing so, publics become accountable for message content while, at the same time, ensuring that the

message is truly representative of their interests thereby ensuring that the message is credible (Beder, 1998). As a result, astroturf messages would gain legitimacy through participation (Jacobson, 1994).

Perhaps that is the reason that astroturf organizations have evolved towards a more participatory approach since the time frame examined in this study. Since 2007, two of the organizations—The Progress and Freedom Foundation and Frontiers of Freedom—have become much less active while the third—FreedomWorks—has aligned itself with the Tea Party movement. FreedomWorks leaders Dick Armey and Matt Kibbe coauthored the book *Give Us Liberty: A Tea Party Manifesto* in 2010 (Armey & Kibbe, 2010). Their book tells the story of the movement's emergence in 2009 and then goes on to advocate for a fundamentalist interpretation of the Constitution (Armey & Kibbe, 2010). By aligning their grassroots-type membership base with the political ideals and participatory structure of the Tea Party movement, both factions seem to have become stronger and the ideas proffered by FreedomWorks have become more prevalent in current media coverage. Based on the research conducted by Schwartz (2010), this phenomenon of alignment occurs when a social movement begins to transition into a political party.

### **Directions for Future Research**

A lot has changed in the astroturf arena between 2007 and today and a lot of questions remain unanswered: Why did these astroturf organizations use these particular message frames when discussing telecommunications deregulation? How have astroturf messages impacted target publics and to what end? How have their message frames changed over time? Why are astroturf organizations more successful in mobilizing target publics than they were between 2005 and 2007? While this study

cannot begin to answer these questions, it does lead to the hypothesis that astroturf organizations may have used these message frames simply to influence voters to elect candidates that share the same regulatory positions as the astroturf organizations. However, since astroturf organizations framed their messages differently than politicians, it is not likely that politicians would have shared the same motivations as the astroturf organizations. Likewise, voters would have believed that they were electing like-minded candidates, but they may not have truly understood—or even agreed with—their representatives' stance on regulatory issues or the reason for which a representative had chosen a particular position. Thus, any resulting regulatory policy would have been more likely to reflect constituents' perceived needs instead of their actual needs and to do so with full constituent endorsement.

This study provides some new information about the discord between message frames used by astroturf organizations and those used by other communicators that are active in the telecommunications deregulation debate. It also raises some questions about the motives behind astroturf message framing, the effectiveness of astroturf communication strategies, and the evolution of astroturf communication. Therefore, future research should ask: What are the motives behind FreedomWorks framing strategy? How does astroturf message framing impact the target audience's attitudes and voting behaviors? And how has astroturf message framing changed since 2007?

These questions certainly merit further study to determine the extent to which astroturf message frames shape the inferences that publics make about key political issues, the extent to which they agree or disagree with astroturf messages, whether that agreement is based on systematic or heuristic message processing, and whether level

of agreement correlates with voting behavior. In order to answer this new set of questions, future research should incorporate a comprehensive survey of voters who have completed varying levels of education, who come from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, and different geographic locations around the United States as well as leaders and active members in astroturf organizations like FreedomWorks and within the Tea Party movement. Furthermore, it would be important to develop an inclusive list of astroturf organizations active at the time of analysis and to differentiate between voters who have and have not been exposed to messages disseminated by the astroturf organizations. Such a study would increase our understanding of how astroturf mobilization affects attitudes and behaviors. Furthermore, a comparison of the endurance of astroturf messages and the extent to which they utilize heuristics could allow researchers to more firm conclusions about the effectiveness of astroturf communication tactics in 2007, now, and in the future. Perhaps, future research can lead us to determine the point at which astroturf organizations like the ones studied here became major political influencers instead of marginal political voices.

### **Limitations**

Regardless, though, of the potential contributions to the body of knowledge of message construction and the political implications of the evolution of astroturf communication, this study has several limitations. Most glaring is the inability of this study to test for correlations between the presence of message frames in the news and Congressional samples and the presence of message frames in the original astroturf organizational literature. Instead, for the purposes of the present study, the researcher read the position statements and press releases published by FreedomWorks, the Progress and Freedom Foundation, and Frontiers of Freedom to determine how these

organizations framed messages related to the telecommunications deregulation debate. But a full content analysis of the presence of message frames in the astroturf organizational literature was not conducted because the astroturf organizations examined here removed many of their communication products from their Web sites after the conclusion of the 2006 Review of the Media Ownership Rules and around the same time that the government tightened lobbying restrictions with the Legislative Transparency and Accountability Acts of 2006 and 2007. This removal of literature occurred before the research could conduct a valid analysis of the frames used by the astroturf organizations.

Also missing was a full analysis of the valence of articles in the research sample. According to the code book, valence was only coded if one or both of the generic message frames was present. In cases where neither generic frame was present, no valence was coded. As a result, the researcher cannot determine whether the valence of an article has any relationship with its employment of the message frames studied here.

Another limiting factor was this study's focus on only two of the recognized generic message frames. Other generic frames identified by the framing literature include conflict, human interest, human impact, morality, and powerlessness (de Vreese, 2005; Neuman, et al., 1992; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Since the researcher did not analyze the presence or absence of all recognized frames, it was not possible to accurately conclude whether or not documents in the news population and in the Congressional sample used the same message frames or discussed the issue of telecommunications deregulation in the same way. Instead, this research merely

indicates a correlation between the two samples regarding the presence of the two message frames studied.

To correct for these limitations, future research should incorporate an analysis of all message frames, should address multiple issues including, but not limited to, telecommunications deregulation, and should be longitudinal in nature. Future research should also include more comprehensive qualitative analysis of the motives of astroturf communicators and their effects on target publics to better identify audience and communicator frames—the framework that exists outside of the message text. Despite these methodological limitations, this study has answered the research questions posed above and highlighted the idea that astroturf communication techniques are important and relevant to the body of knowledge about message construction, dissemination, and reception. Moreover, this study has highlighted some potential flaws in the common practice of two-way asymmetrical communication within the political arena. Based on that conclusion, practitioners ought to be cautious when choosing to employ astroturf-style communication campaigns. Although this type of message framing is both persuasive and easy for target audiences to process, the messages may not be strong enough to elicit enduring attitudinal and behavioral change without also employing a Tea Party-style participatory approach.

APPENDIX A  
CODE SHEET

Article ID: \_\_\_\_\_

Article date: \_\_\_\_\_

Coder initials: \_\_\_\_\_

Coding date: \_\_\_\_\_

Data:

- 1-Was the economic *generic frame* present in this article?
  - Yes -1
  - No -2
  - 1A-If yes, was the argument in favor of deregulation, against deregulation, or neutral?
    - Negative/Against deregulation -3
    - Neutral -4
    - Positive/In favor of deregulation -5
  - 1B-Was the “economic benefit to taxpayers” *issue frame* present?
    - Yes -1
    - No -2
  - 1Bv-Was the frame in favor of deregulation or against deregulation?
    - Negative/Against deregulation -3
    - Positive/In favor of deregulation -5
  - 1C-Was the “threat to free market enterprise” *issue frame* present?
    - Yes -1
    - No -2
  - 1Cv- Was the frame in favor of deregulation or against deregulation?
    - Negative/Against deregulation -3
    - Positive/In favor of deregulation -5
  - 1D-Was the “waste of government/taxpayer financial resources” *issue frame* present?
    - Yes -1
    - No -2
  - 1Dv- Was the frame in favor of deregulation or against deregulation?
    - Negative/Against deregulation -3
    - Positive/In favor of deregulation -5
- 2-Was the attribution of responsibility *generic frame* present in this article?
  - Yes -1
  - No -2
  - 2A-If yes, was the argument in favor of deregulation, against deregulation, or neutral?
    - Negative/Against deregulation -3

- Neutral -4
    - Positive/In favor of deregulation -5
  - 2B-Was the “attributing responsibility to regulators for necessitating that telecommunications companies transfer regulatory costs to consumers” *issue frame* present?
    - Yes -1
    - No -2
  - 2Bv- If yes, was the argument in favor of deregulation or against deregulation?
    - Negative/Against deregulation -3
    - Positive/In favor of deregulation -5
  - 2C-Was the “attributing responsibility to government regulation for impeding technological growth” *issue frame* present?
    - Yes -1
    - No -2
  - 2Cv-If yes, was the argument in favor of deregulation or against deregulation?
    - Negative/Against deregulation -3
    - Positive/In favor of deregulation -5
  - 2D-Was the “attributing responsibility to government regulation for inhibiting/limiting consumer choice among telecommunications services” *issue frame* present?
    - Yes -1
    - No -2
  - 2Dv- If yes, was the argument in favor of deregulation or against deregulation?
    - Negative/Against deregulation -3
    - Positive/In favor of deregulation -5
- 3-Policy Documents Only: Select a document type from the list below:
  - Congressional legislation -6
  - Congressional committee meeting/hearing -7
  - FCC policy -8
  - FCC committee meeting/hearing -9
  - Public comment (not part of a hearing) -10
  - Other (if other, make a note) -11
- 4-Policy Documents Only: Is this document written or dictated by a government official or on behalf of a government agency?
  - Yes -12
  - No -13
  - Both -14

## APPENDIX B CODE BOOK

**Article ID:** Each news article and policy document will be given a unique article number, which will be found at the top of the first page if your article is printed or in the file name if your article is electronic. Please note that news article numbers are completely numeric and policy document numbers will end with the letter C. Also, in the event that there are multiple, distinct authors of multiple distinct statements within one document, each statement will be coded separately. In these cases, the author's name will follow the Article ID number.

**Article date:** If you are coding a news article, please indicate the date that the news article was published. If you are coding a policy document, please indicate the date the document was released to the public, made effective, or signed into law.

**Coder initials:** Please use your first, middle, and last initial for coder identification, should that be necessary.

**Coding date:** Please indicate the date that you coded the article.

**Coding Frames:** The main purpose of this study is to analyze the presence of two generic message frames within the text that you are coding—the economic frame and the attribution of responsibility frame. As you read each article, please be cognizant of the presence of each generic frame so that you may code accordingly. Please see definitions of these frames and step-by-step instructions for coding the presence of each frame below.

The Economic Generic Frame—An article that is economically framed addresses a given issue, idea, or person in terms of his/her/its economic consequences, either for the intended message recipient, or for society as a whole (Neuman, et al., 1992; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Valkenburg, et al., 1999). Themes that may be present in an economically framed article may include, but are not limited to, “the bottom line” or “profit loss” (Neuman, et al., 1992).

The Attribution of Responsibility Generic Frame—An article that is framed by the attribution of responsibility will distinguish the issue at hand as a problem and will “attribute responsibility for causing or solving [that problem] to either the government or to an individual or group” (Neuman, et al., 1992). While a theme of conflict may be present, conflicting opinions over who to blame should not be present within the same article—the presence of conflicting opinions would indicate the presence a different generic frame for which we are not presently coding (Valkenburg, et al., 1999).

Valence—If either generic frame is detected, you must also code for the valence of that frame—whether the article takes a positive, negative, or neutral tone overall. A positive article takes a position in favor of telecommunications deregulation. A negative article takes a position against telecommunications deregulation. A neutral article represents both positions or does not take either position.

Issue Frames—The issue frames have been grouped under each generic frame. Please see the instructions below regarding coding of issue frames and related items.

- 1-Was the economic *generic frame* present in this article? After reading the entire article, please indicate the overall presence of the economic frame by selecting 1 or the absence of the economic frame by selecting 2.
  - 1A-Valence
    - If you selected 1 (frame is present), please indicate whether the overall tone of the article was negative/against deregulation (3), neutral (4), or positive/in favor of deregulation (5), and proceed to question 1B.
    - If you selected 2 (frame is absent), then enter a zero in cells 1A-1D and proceed to question 2.
  - 1B-Was the “economic benefit to taxpayers” *issue frame* present?
    - Select 1 if the frame is present.
    - Select 2 if the frame is absent.
  - 1Bv-Valence
    - Select 5 if they article is written from the perspective that deregulation is a benefit to taxpayers.
    - Select 3 if the article is written from the perspective that deregulation is not a benefit to taxpayers.
  - 1C-Was the “threat to free market enterprise” *issue frame* present?
    - Select 1 if the frame is present.
    - Select 2 if the frame is absent.
  - 1Cv-Valence
    - Select 5 if the article is written from the perspective that telecommunications deregulation is not a threat to free market enterprise, new entrants to the telecommunications market, or free competition among telecommunications providers.
    - Select 3 if the article is written from the perspective that telecommunications deregulation is a threat to free market enterprise, new entrants to the telecommunications market, or free competition among telecommunications providers.
  - 1D-Was the “waste of government/taxpayer financial resources” *issue frame* present?
    - Select 1 if the frame is present.
    - Select 2 if the frame is absent.
  - 1Dv-Valence
    - Select 5 if the article is written from the perspective that regulation has wasted either government or taxpayer financial resources. Please note that the term money is equivalent to the term financial resources for the purposes of this question.
    - Select 3 if the article is written from the perspective that regulation has not wasted either government or taxpayer financial resources.

Please note that the term money is equivalent to the term financial resources for the purposes of this question.

- 2-Was the attribution of responsibility *generic frame* present in this article? After reading the entire article, please indicate the overall presence of the attribution of responsibility frame by selecting 1 or the absence of the attribution of responsibility frame by selecting 2.
  - 2A-Valence
    - If you selected 1 (frame is present), please indicate whether the overall tone of the article was negative/against deregulation (3), neutral (4), or positive/in favor of deregulation (5) and proceed to question 2B.
    - If you selected 2 (frame is absent), then you have now completed coding this article. If you are coding a policy document, then please proceed to question 3. If you are coding a news article, then you have completed the code sheet for this article.
  - 2B-Was the “attributing responsibility to regulators for necessitating that telecommunications companies transfer regulatory costs to consumers” *issue frame* present?
    - Select 1 if the frame is present.
    - Select 2 if the frame is absent.
  - 2Bv-Valence
    - Select 5 if the article is written from the perspective that regulators are responsible for the transference of regulatory costs from telecommunications providers to consumers.
    - Select 3 if the article is written from the perspective that regulators are not responsible for the transference of regulatory costs from telecommunications providers to consumers.
  - 2C-Was the “attributing responsibility to government regulation for impeding technological growth” *issue frame* present?
    - Select 1 if the frame is present.
    - Select 2 if the frame is absent.
  - 2Cv-Valence
    - Select 5 if the article is written from the perspective that government regulators are responsible for the impediment of technological growth.
    - Select 3 if the article is written from the perspective that government regulators are not responsible for the impediment of technological growth.
  - 2D-Was the “attributing responsibility to government regulation for inhibiting/limiting consumer choice among telecommunications services” *issue frame* present?
    - Select 1 if the frame is present.
    - Select 2 if the frame is absent.
  - 2Dv-Valence

- Select 5 if the article is written from the perspective that government regulation does inhibit or limit consumer choice among telecommunications services.
  - Select 3 if the article is written from the perspective that government regulation does not inhibit or limit consumer choice among telecommunications services.
  - If you are coding a news article, then you are done; if you are coding a policy document, then please proceed to question 3.
- 3-Policy documents (document numbers ending in C) can originate from several different settings. If you are coding a policy document, then please indicate its origin:
  - Select 6 if the document is a congressional bill or amendment that has been signed into law.
  - Select 7 if the document is a record of a congressional committee meeting or hearing AND is not signed into law.
  - Select 8 if the document is FCC policy.
  - Select 9 if the document is a record of an FCC committee meeting or hearing.
  - Select 10 if the document is a public comment submitted to the FCC, but is not part of an FCC hearing.
  - Select 11 for all other document types and indicate a potential category under which this document might fall in the notes column.
- 4-Policy documents (document numbers ending in C) may have multiple authors contributing individual statements within the same document. Since different authors may utilize frames differently, each author's statement must be coded separately under a unique document number. Statements will be distinguished by adding the author's name to the end of the article ID number. Please identify whether the author of each statement is a government official or acting on behalf of a government agency:
  - Select 12 if the statement is written or dictated by a government official or on behalf of a government agency.
  - Select 13 if the statement is attributed to any non-governmental source.
  - Select 14 if the statement is attributed to an author who is writing or speaking on behalf of both government and non-governmental entities.
- Use the Notes column if you feel it necessary to convey any additional information.

# APPENDIX C FREEDOMWORKS ACTION ALERT



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## Action Alert



### Choose Your Cable in Ohio!

Ohio has a chance to bring competition and choice to the cable T.V. market. **SB 117**, authored by state senator Jeff Jacobson (R-Butler Township), would eliminate burdensome franchise laws in Ohio that are blocking increased competition in the video programming (traditional "cable T.V.") market.

**TAKE ACTION NOW** to tell legislators to support this bill that would bring competition and choice to Ohio consumers!

## Take Action

**1 COMPOSE MESSAGE**

**Message Recipients:**

- Governor Ted Strickland
- Lt. Governor Lee Fisher
- Your State Upper Chamber Representatives
- Your State Lower Chamber Representatives

**Delivery Method:**

Email  
 Printed Letter

**Subject:**

**Editable text:**  
(edit or add your own text - 9220 characters left)

Ohio has a chance to bring competition and choice to the cable T.V. market. SB 117, authored by state senator Jeff Jacobson (R-Butler Township), would eliminate burdensome franchise laws in Ohio that are blocking increased competition in the video programming (traditional "cable T.V.") market.

SB 117 streamlines the franchise application process for video services providers. It would promote competition while creating incentives to invest in the networks that will place Ohio at the forefront of the emerging new telecommunications market, which will directly benefit consumers.

When companies compete to provide service, consumers win through more choices, better service, and lower prices. Please support SB 117 to inject Tip: Cutting-and-pasting? Save as [plain text](#) first.

**Your Closing:**   
**Your Name:**

Remember Me! ([what's this?](#))  
 Sign me up for the Action E-List.

**A copy of your message will be sent to the e-mail address entered above.**

**Your Contact Information:**  
This system requires that you provide your name and contact information. This information will not be used for any purpose other than to identify you to the recipient.

**Title** ([required](#) by some officials)

**First\***

**Last\***

**Email\***

**Address\***

**City\***

**State\***

**ZIP\***   **ZIP + 4**

**Phone**

(Please click only once.)

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Lisa Yablonsky earned Bachelor of Arts degrees in Comparative Literature and Spanish at the Pennsylvania State University (2003) in University Park, Pennsylvania and a Master of Arts in Mass Communication at the University of Florida (2011) in Gainesville, FL. She began her career in the Media Relations Office of the World Council of Churches, a Swiss-based NGO. In the fall of 2005, Lisa joined the graduate program in the College of Journalism and Communications at the University of Florida. While there, she worked as a college admissions counselor and served as a graduate assistant and undergraduate advisor in the Office of Undergraduate Affairs in the College of Journalism and Communications. Her research interests include message construction, framing, and political communication.