

Framing the News

We like to think of reality as fixed, as something we can all agree on. We trust the news media may make mistakes, but largely present reality “the way it is”. The news media make every effort to promote this view by trying to appear neutral and objective. But the writers and editors who report the news are anything but objective. They construct a subjective picture of reality, selecting and organizing a confusing flood of information in a way that make sense to themselves and their audiences. This process is called framing.

Struggles over framing decide which of the day’s many happenings will be awarded significance. The media have become critical arenas for this struggle. Social movements have increasingly focused on the media since it plays such an influential role in assigning importance to public issues. But gaining attention alone is not what a social movement wants. The real battle is over whose interpretation, whose framing of reality, gets the floor.

Most information we receive is already framed: friends offer opposing accounts of a feud; TV, radio, and newspapers interpret events that we do not experience directly. Even when we are actual witnesses, we are not privileged with the truth. Who we are—our class, gender, race, past experience, values, and interests—all come into play when we try to make sense of what’s happening.

Yet it is common to downplay framing as a value-laden ordering process. Those of us who question the naturalness of the packaged world are ignored or attacked, rarely believed. This is because frames are not consciously or deliberately constructed, but operate as underlying mind sets that prompt one to notice elements that are familiar and ignore those that are different. News frames are almost entirely implicit and taken for granted. They do not appear to either journalists or audience as social constructions but as primary attributes of events that reporters are merely reflecting. News frames make the world look natural. They determine what is selected, what is excluded, what is emphasized. In short, news presents a packaged world. Far from being an objective list of facts, a news story results from multiple subjective decisions about whether and how to present happenings to media audiences. The editors’ and reporters’ own perspectives, including their notions of audience interests, guide this process. As a result, stories covering the same happening may vary dramatically. Consider the following hypothetical alternative versions of the same incident:

Version 1: Rats Bite Infant

An infant left sleeping in his crib was bitten repeatedly by rats while his 16-year-old mother went to cash her welfare check. A neighbor responded to the cries of the infant and brought the child to Central Hospital where he was treated and released in his mother's custody. The mother, Angie Burns of the South End, explained softly, "I was only gone five minutes. I left the door open so my neighbor would hear him if he woke up. I never thought this would happen in the daylight. "

Version 2: Rats Bite Infant: Landlord, Tenants Dispute Blame

An eight-month-old South End boy was treated and released from Central Hospital yesterday after being bitten by rats while he was sleeping in his crib. Tenants said that repeated requests for extermination had been ignored by the landlord, Henry Brown. Brown claimed that the problem lay with tenants' improper disposal of garbage. "I spend half my time cleaning up after them. They throw garbage out the window into the back alley and their kids steal the garbage can covers for sliding in the snow."

Version 3: Rat Bites Rising in City's 'Zone of death'

Rats bit eight-month-old Michael Burns five times yesterday as he napped in his crib. Burns is the latest victim of a rat epidemic plaguing inner-city neighborhoods labeled the "Zone of Death." Health officials say infant mortality rates in these neighborhoods approach those in many third world countries. A Public Health Department spokesperson explained that federal and state cutbacks forced short-staffing at rat control and housing inspection programs. The result, noted Joaquin Nunez, MD, a pediatrician at Central Hospital, is a five-fold increase in rat bites. He added, "The irony is that Michael lives within walking distance of some of the world's best medical centers."

The stories share little beyond the fact that the child was bitten by rats. Each version is shaped or framed by layers of assumptions. To say each version of the story represents a different frame means that each has a distinct definition of the issue, of who is responsible, and of how the issue might be resolved.

Symbols carry the story line

One seldom encounters a news account that explicitly presents the core argument of the frame. More commonly, an image or set of images—metaphors, catch-phrases, or anecdotes—carry the frame. Each rat story cultivates a battery of images. Version 1 speaks of an infant left in his crib (read abandoned) by a teenage mother who exercises questionable judgment because she is eager to cash a welfare check. Version 2 features a

dispute and presents both sides—however, the landlord is given far more space to present images: he mentions spending “half his time” cleaning up after irresponsible tenants who throw garbage out windows while their children, petty thieves, steal garbage can covers. Version 3 uses comparative mortality rates, rat bite statistics, and respected figures like doctors and public officials to add an aura of scientific validity and further legitimate the frame. To save the story from sterility, Version 3 incorporates metaphors like “Zone of Death,” and makes reference to infant mortality in third world countries.

Implicit Audiences

In choosing frames, news editors and/or writers are often implicitly speaking to and for definite audiences. Each version of the rat bite story might speak for and to a different audience. Version 1 might appeal to those who oppose welfare, or those whose world view stresses individual accountability.

Version 2 centers on a pluralist message, one that appeals to people who see society as a tug of war between interest groups, ranging from tenant groups to free-market-oriented landlord associations. Version 3 stresses a public health ethic that would appeal to municipal health administrators, citizen action groups, and environmentalists.

The special risks of the challenger frame

All those who sponsor frames work to gain access to mainstream media.

Even the dominant frame does not succeed without effort. Yet challengers who sponsor opposition frames must overcome the additional hurdles of inequalities in access, and a higher risk of frame distortion by the media.

Inequalities in access

Those who support a dominant frame reap the benefits of media access.

Many are established institutions with well-staffed media relations operations. The Pentagon, for instance, has no fewer than 3,000 employees devoted to public relations, and publishes 1,203 periodicals. Each branch of the U.S. military is also capable of launching an additional media blitz.

Challengers can rarely match the resources of these dominant institutions.

Less access means the media and audiences have less familiarity with the challenger frames. And limited familiarity lessens credibility.

To combat anonymity, the challenger frame needs more access, more exposure than mainstream media usually allow. The dominant frame can call its whole argument to mind with the mere mention of symbolic elements; a challenger cannot rely on this easy familiarity. At least in the short run, time is on the side of the dominant frame.

Distortion of content

Dominant frames have ideological inertia on their side—they build on assumptions so taken for granted that mainstream media perceive them as the only logical approach to a situation. Conversely, challengers present unknown information organized around unfamiliar political assumptions. The resulting frames initially seem strange, forced, or unnatural to the mainstream media and its audience.

One of the most common forms of distortion involves the rendering of challenger perspectives from within the logic of the dominant perspective. For example, in the 1980s, with government and big business declaring major and minor economic miracles, unions had an uphill battle to establish the validity of their complaints. Communities with high unemployment, particularly African-American and Latino communities, had to battle the dominant frame's contention: "There's work for those who want it."

Another common distortion is the flattening of challenger frames. Here the media's unfamiliarity with the challenger frame coupled with the superficiality of U.S. news formats results in a watery version of the challenger frame. When a challenger frame is built on unfamiliar assumptions, the media will tend to translate the frame into the closest mainstream approximation.

Despite their disadvantages, challengers do often manage to gain a hearing for their opposition frames, albeit partial or distorted. Victory is seldom such that the challenger frame achieves equal status to the dominant frame, more commonly, it is that the challenger frame did not allow the dominant frame to hold sway uncontested.

Activists respond with mobilizing frames

If an authority is acting in a normal, unexceptionable manner, the underlying legitimating frame is taken for granted. But frames are vulnerable. Sometimes actions or events occur that break the hegemony of the legitimating frame. If people are going to resist authority, they need to adopt an alternative mobilizing frame as a context for what is happenings redefinition that questions compliance.

Mobilizing frames usually have three characteristics:

- The issue, the responsibility, and the solution are all defined collectively.
- They are focused on conflict. There is a clearly defined opponent, "them," and a clearly identified challenger, "us."
- They launch a moral appeal. What's happening to the challenger is unjust, unfair, plain wrong, and violates basic social standards in some regard. Let us review these characteristics in more detail.

Collective definition

A mobilizing frame pushes audiences to see problems not as individual but as collective. The definition of the issue stresses its social character, responsibility for dealing with the issue is collective; and the solution happens on a structural level. Note that a demobilizing frame does the reverse, making problems ever more individual.

The rat bite stories offer an example. The most demobilizing frame is Version 1 which says the issue is teen mothers (who may represent a social group but are not organized and have few representative voices able to respond). Version 1, further says responsibility lies with individual mothers, in this case Angie Burns. Finally, as a solution Version 1 proposes individual parent watchfulness.

Why is this demobilizing? Think of Angie Burns, a young, low-income woman struggling to be a good mother under multiple burdens. She has just been told that the rat bites are her fault. Is she likely to become more politically active? Does the solution suggested bring her into contact with other poor young parents who share her problem?

What about the other two frames? Version 2, the tenant-landlord frame, defines the issue collectively, the landlord vs. the tenants as an organized group. The offered solution of Housing Court, however, may or may not be a collective one. Becoming involved in a public institution can, but does not necessarily, collectivize the solution. We would need to know if tenants' cases are being treated individually or collectively, if tenant organizers encourage tenants to appear en masse, to prepare collective testimony, to reach the public directly or via the media. Or could a court-focused battle revolve around individual settlements which could isolate the tenants from each other?

The issue of collectivization also arises with the public health frame. Is Angie Burns offered any collective support by this frame? Or is she told that sympathetic city officials and state officials are pleading with federal officials on her behalf? The mobilization potential of the frame depends on whether or not community residents vulnerable to the rat epidemic are actively included in the solution. Thus the public health frame could mobilize, or it could demure into a defense of the modern social welfare state.

Conflict

The tenant-landlord frame focuses more than the others on conflict. It has two clearly drawn sides locked in battle over the issue at hand. The other two frames have an unclear target or an unclear challenger. Angie and mothers like her are the clear target of the first frame, but they are not considered a

group, and they oppose no other group. Likewise, the public health frame does not draw dear sides. Public health officials closest to the scene generally see themselves as allied with the residents, yet the relation between local and federal public health agencies is one of cooperation as well as conflict. For the public health frame include sufficient conflict, a challenger group representing community residents would have to contend with a clear target which, it could be argued, was genuinely responsible for the problem.

Moral Appeal

Having defined the challengers as a collective in conflict with some other collective (usually institution), it is critical for the mobilizing frame to use a moral appeal to argue that the dominant frameholder is violating shared moral principles. In the rat story, two frames make strong moral appeals, the anti-welfare frame (which stresses the wrongness of babies having babies), and the public health frame (which stresses the fundamental injustice of a little baby in a wealthy developed nation being mauled by rats). For the tenant-landlord frame to include a moral appeal, the tenants would have to seem more than an interested party feuding over facts. They would have to present clear evidence that Henry Brown is not a responsible landlord, and that he is insensitive to his tenants' suffering.

Activists can be more effective if they pay attention to the potential energy of mobilizing frames. But they need to be careful. A mobilizing frame is not a superficial creation designed to woo audiences. A mobilizing frame is one part of the sweaty, often tedious detailed work of organizing—identifying which groups share what concerns, and whether or not they feel strongly enough to confront an identifiable foe. As such, a mobilizing frame is not a kind of media magic, but an approach to organizing which, in strengthening one's base, strengthens one's hand with the media.

The Citizens Handbook www.vcn.bc.ca/citizens-handbook

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