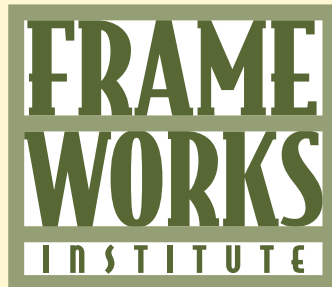
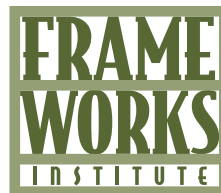


# FRAMING PUBLIC ISSUES



# Toolkit Table of Contents

I. Framing a Message: How to Think About Communications	1
II. Strategic Frame Analysis and Policy Making: Where Does SFA Fit into Our Strategic Plan?	7
III. Thinking Strategically About Framing: Elements of the Frame	
A. Context	16
B. Numbers	19
C. Messengers	22
D. Visuals	24
E. Metaphors and Simplifying Models	26
F. Tone	29
IV. A Framing Checklist	33
V. Some Important Definitions	35
VI. Framing Techniques	
A. Communications Traps to Avoid: Don't Think About Elephants	38
B. Bridging	42
VII. A FrameWorks Bibliography	51



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This Toolkit was created by the FrameWorks Institute to help issues advocates learn and apply new communications thinking to frame their work for better public understanding and engagement. We hope that these tools will inspire new thinking and new techniques among policy experts and advocates who seek to resolve social problems – whether for children and families in a particular state or for the global environment.

“Framing Public Issues,” the Workshop and the Toolkit, bring to issues advocates some of the most exciting new thinking on communications. The FrameWorks Institute, in partnership with a research team of scholars and practitioners, has pioneered a new approach to communicating social issues called strategic frame analysis. This approach incorporates key concepts from the cognitive and social sciences that govern how people process information, especially news, with special emphasis on social problems, from adolescent development and child care to low-wage work and violence prevention.

In the pages that follow and in the trainings that often accompany this Toolkit, you will learn how to answer questions like the following: What shapes public opinion about the issues that affect children, families, poor people, communities? What role does the news play? How do policymakers gauge public opinion? How can I do a better job of helping people see the realities my organization struggles to address every day? The answers to these questions will help you translate your vision of what can be done to improve public life into a language that engages ordinary people and advances their interest in policy and program solutions.

The work of many collaborators is reflected in these pages. Most prominently: Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr., Ph.D., Associate Vice Chancellor, Community Partnerships and Director, Center for Communications and Community, UCLA; Axel Aubrun and Joe Grady from Cultural Logic; and Meg Bostrom with Public Knowledge. We also wish to thank Lauri Andress for writing the section on Strategic Frame Analysis and Policy Making. We encourage you to stay in touch with our work through our Website, [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org), where we routinely post foundation-sponsored multi-method research on public perceptions of numerous social issues.

Please note that, should you wish to quote from or use parts of this Toolkit, standard rules of citation and permission apply. Please consult the FrameWorks Institute for permission to distribute multiple copies.

Susan Nall Bales  
President, FrameWorks Institute  
April 2005  
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# I. Framing A Message: How to Think About Communications

The FrameWorks Institute works with nonprofit groups and philanthropic foundations to document how the American public understands various social issues and how nonprofit communicators can frame the public discourse on those issues to advance policy outcomes. To do this, we have developed an approach called strategic frame analysis (SFA), a new way of thinking about communications that FrameWorks believes is especially relevant to the types of social issues addressed by Workshop participants. What follows is an overview of this approach, with examples and applications provided in subsequent pages. For those who are interested in learning more about this perspective, we invite you to visit our Website at [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org), and to peruse techniques and examples posted online from a variety of issues arenas. FrameWorks also offers an online, interactive workshop at [www.eworkshop.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.eworkshop.frameworksinstitute.org) (passcode: j51qiu), focusing specifically on children's issues.

"The way in which the world is imagined determines at any particular moment what men will do."  
Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 1921

When issues advocates approach communications, they do so with three important questions in mind:

1. How do we get people to think about our issues?
2. How do we get them to think about our issues in such a way that they will want to solve them through public policies, not only through individual actions?
3. How do we get them to think about issues in such a way that they want to solve them through our public policies?

## WHAT RESEARCH SUGGESTS

- People use mental shortcuts to make sense of the world.
- Incoming information provides cues about where to "file" it mentally.
- People get most information about public affairs from the news media which, over time, creates a framework of expectation, or a dominant frame.
- Over time, we develop habits of thought and expectation and configure incoming information to conform to this frame.

Strategic frame analysis – FrameWorks' approach to communications – is based on a decade of research in the social and cognitive sciences that demonstrates that the answers to these questions relates to what Walter Lippmann called "the pictures in our heads." People use mental shortcuts to make sense of the world. These mental shortcuts rely on "frames," or a small set of internalized concepts and values that allow us to accord meaning to unfolding events and new information. These frames can be triggered by various elements, such as language choices and different messengers or images. These communications elements, therefore, have a profound influence on decision outcomes.

Frames are existing constructs that allow us to interpret developing events. William Raspberry, writing in *The Washington Post*, explains the power of frames when he says,

# I. Framing A Message: How to Think About Communications

Continued

"Perhaps the only way we can assimilate new information is by fitting it into the framework of something we already understand." He goes on to explore the meaning of terrorism "by thinking about America and black people." And, in so doing, he demonstrates the way our judgments about political issues can be influenced by the frame we use to make sense of new situations. Thinking about the civil-rights movement, Raspberry writes: "When we saw it as a choice between civil progress and bloodshed, our minds went one way. When we saw the choice as between siding with brutal law enforcement and siding with black folk demanding change, our minds went the other way." Raspberry has elegantly illuminated the framing process that is so critical, if invisible, to political judgment.

## WHAT IS A FRAME?

"Frames are organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world."

*Stephen D. Reese, Framing Public Life, 2001*

## WHERE DO PEOPLE GET THEIR FRAMES OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS?

"Most people don't think about most issues most of the time," write Nelson Polsby and Aaron Wildavsky in a famous analysis of American public opinion. The public has little daily contact with many issues on the public agenda, yet their opinions greatly influence policymaker priorities and behavior. Traditionally, news media is the main source of Americans' information about public affairs. In this way, the media dramatically influences what issues the public and their policymakers will address. Moreover, messages conveyed by mainstream media take on the value of public narratives about the ways of the world. Thus, media doesn't simply tell us what to think about, it tells us how to think about issues. News coverage influences:

What issues people think are important for government to address (agenda-setting)

The lens through which people interpret issues (framing), and

What information will prove relevant for social and political judgments (priming).

Our research on young adults/teens, for example, included an investigation of how the news media covered the issue. This analysis sought to chart the volume of coverage to see if teens figured on the national agenda, to isolate the way the media was framing the issue – how it was telling the "teens" story. We looked for explanations of cause, not merely effect, and for the inclusion of solutions and policy debates in the coverage. We did so because we know that different kinds of frames have different kinds of effects on public opinion.

"The use of either the episodic or the thematic news frame affects how individuals assign responsibility for political issues; episodic framing tends to elicit individualistic rather than societal attributions of responsibility while thematic framing has the opposite effect. Since television news is heavily episodic, its effect is generally to induce attributions of responsibility to individual victims or perpetrators rather than to broad social forces."

*Shanto Iyengar, Is Anyone Responsible?, 1991*

# I. Framing A Message: How to Think About Communications

Continued

The episodic frame presents a portrait, while the thematic frame pulls the camera back to present a landscape. The importance of this distinction is that the two types of frames have very different effects on how people view a given problem--and whether people will see the need for individual-level and/or broader environmental or institutional solutions to that problem.

Episodic frames reduce life to a series of disconnected episodes, random events or case studies. "Betty Jones and her family of four are braving the elements tonight because the homeless shelter was full," begins an episodic story on the homeless. Such a news story might go on to describe how the children miss their toys, how cold it is, when they last ate, etc. What it will not describe is how many people are homeless in this city, whether the numbers are increasing or decreasing, or the root causes of homelessness.

In contrast, thematic frames provide details about trends, not just individuals; they identify shortcomings at the community or systems level that have contributed to the problem.

"The homeless shelter at 4th and Q was full again tonight because of drastic reductions in city allocations, and this situation is taking its toll on families like Betty Jones'. But the mayor says the Jones family will have to brave it because there is no more money in the city to pay ...."

The more episodically social issues are framed, the less likely it is that citizens will hold government accountable for solving the problem. The more thematic and contextual the coverage, the more likely it is that citizens will see the issue as one appropriate to government resolution.

The media's influence on how we think about social problems lasts far beyond our memory of a particular newscast or news topic. The way the news is "framed" on many issues sets up habits of thought and expectation that, over time, are so powerful that they serve to configure new information to conform to this frame. When advocacy groups communicate to their members and potential adherents, they have options to repeat or break these dominant frames of discourse. Understanding which frames serve to advance which policy options with which groups becomes central to any movement's strategy.

The literature of social movements suggests that the prudent choice of frames, and the ability to effectively contest the opposition's frames, lie at the heart of successful policy advocacy. Most movements are associated with the development of an innovative master frame that will either constrain or inspire that movement's future development. When the nuclear freeze had to grow beyond armaments, scholars argue, the frame could not accommodate that growth. A frame isn't simply a slogan repeated over and over; rather, it is a conceptual construct capable of helping us organize our world. When frames fail to do so, they are discarded in favor of other frames. But more often, when new facts are submitted that do not resonate with the frames we hold in our heads, it is the facts that are rejected, not the frames.

# I. Framing A Message: How to Think About Communications

Continued

We find particularly helpful Deborah Tannen's explanation of how frames work: "People approach the world not as naïve, blank-slate receptacles who take in stimuli ...in some independent and objective way, but rather as experienced and sophisticated *veterans of perception* who have stored their prior experiences as an organized mass. This prior experience then takes the form of expectations about the world, and in the vast majority of cases, the world, being a systematic place, confirms these expectations, saving the individual the trouble of figuring things out anew all the time."

Frames are powerful not only because we have internalized them from media, but because they have become second nature to us – they allow us to process information efficiently and get about our lives. The limited number of frames we use allows us to understand new information in terms of stories we already know.

Finding some familiar element causes us to activate the story that is labeled by that familiar element, and we understand the new story as if it were an exemplar of that old element."

"Understanding means finding a story you already know and saying, 'Oh yeah, that one.'"

"Once we have found (the) story, we stop processing."

Roger Schank, *Tell Me A Story*, 1998

The FrameWorks Institute's perspective on communications, then, is based on the following:

- People are not blank slates
- Communication is interactive
- Communication resonates with people's deeply held values and worldviews
- Communication is frame-based
- When communication is inadequate, people default to the "pictures in their heads"
- When communication is effective, people can see an issue from a different perspective

In this way, the challenge of communications becomes reframing – providing a different lens for the processing of new information. By identifying and empowering rival frames in your communications, you can signal to the public how to think about a given social issue.

But how do you choose between competing frames? How do you know which ones will set up the policy outcomes you wish to promote?

Making that decision requires a base of research that probes beneath visible public opinion to determine why people think the way they do. This research must help communications directors and advocates choose wisely between competing options on the basis of empirical evidence. Only in this way can advocates feel secure that their individual communications tactics are enhancing the larger goal of advancing policy attitudes and solutions.

# I. Framing A Message: How to Think About Communications

Continued

Working from this perspective, the FrameWorks research is designed to explore the following questions:

How does the public think about a particular issue?

What frames are available to them from media, science and advocates' own communications?

What are the consequences of these current frames on public reasoning and policy attitudes?

How can this issue be reframed to evoke a different way of thinking, one that reveals alternative policy choices?

What are the larger values within which this issue should be framed?

Reframes are only possible because ideas and issues come in hierarchies. The cognitive sciences teach us that these hierarchies, or levels of thought, track and direct our thinking. Higher-level frames act as primes for lower-level frames, and higher-level frames map their values and reasoning onto the lower-level frames.

## LEVELS OF UNDERSTANDING

LEVEL ONE: Big ideas, like freedom, justice, community, success, prevention, responsibility

LEVEL TWO: Issue-types, like the environment or child care

LEVEL THREE: Specific issues, like rainforests or earned income tax credits

By appealing to higher-level values to reframe, we can signal to people how to think about various social issues. And by testing the ability of certain Level One frames to lift policy preferences on those issues, we can be sure that we are moving people toward consideration of solutions.

Strategic frame analysis adopts the position, now current in several academic disciplines, that people reason on the basis of deeply held moral values, more than on the basis of self-interest or "pocket-book" appeals. When we approach people as citizens, parents and stewards of the earth, we tap into powerful models that guide their thinking about themselves and their political responsibilities. We do this not by playing "identity politics" or forcing people to identify themselves as "environmentalists" or "child advocates," but rather by reminding them of the widely shared Level One values they already incorporate into their thinking about how to make important choices for the world. At issue are words and concepts like "responsibility," "choice," "dependence," "protection," and "stewardship."

Adopting the perspective of strategic frame analysis means understanding that communications is storytelling, but that the stories we tell must have all the elements in place: frames, messengers, evidence, cause and effect. We must tell a story that is about politics, in the sense that it is about the values that drive us to communal action. We must tell a story that invites people into the solution, by demonstrating that solutions exist. We must tell the story with storytellers whom the public believes have no reason to lie to us, and who have authority and knowledge of the issue.



# I. Framing A Message: How to Think About Communications

Continued

At the same time, strategic frame analysis runs counter to many communications practices. The story we tell is not one of dueling experts, nor is it told in a highly rhetorical style. The story we want to deliver is not a simple slogan, a “silver bullet,” or a bumper sticker, but rather a set of interrelated stories that resonate with deeply held myths about what it means to be an American.

It is this perspective on communications that informs our work at the FrameWorks Institute and which we share with you with the hope that it helps you raise your issue, broaden your constituency, and secure the policies you need. We also hope that our tools and information, which derive from this understanding of how people process information about social issues, provide you with numerous techniques. This overview is distilled from numerous scholars and practitioners whose work is referenced in the FrameWorks bibliography posted on our Website at [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org).

## II. Strategic Frame Analysis & Policy Making

### Where Does SFA Fit into Our Strategic Plan?

From time to time after a presentation on strategic frame analysis, a group will ask how to apply this information to achieve their primary task of passing legislation, advancing a policy at the legislative level, convincing a targeted public group that a policy position should be supported, or creating a communications campaign to promote a specific policy position.

This section is presented in an effort to ground the art and science of framing a message in the larger strategy and tactics that your organization must undertake to advance its public-policy resolutions.

Strategic frame analysis is a key building block in the policy-making process and every activity that you undertake in pursuit of policy making. Used effectively, SFA can become the foundation upon which your organization builds its policy-advocacy strategy.

So as not to veer from our primary goal, we will use a simplified model of the public-policy process to demonstrate the benefits of SFA. In this case it is not the steps of the policy process or the model that we want to emphasize, but rather the role of SFA in the process. Accordingly, the use of a standard model of policy making allows us to deconstruct the process to indicate where SFA fits in each step of the policy model.

Let's look at the phases of the policy-making process as traditionally identified in the policy literature.

- Problem identification/gaining agenda status
- Policy formulation and adoption
- Policy implementation
- Policy evaluation/adjustment/termination

In order to illuminate the contribution of SFA to policymaking, we will first discuss policy-making in general, presenting a normative view of the process. We will then shift to a definition that more closely matches the objectives of SFA. Next we will quickly review each policy making phase, culminating with an emphasis on the first phase, where SFA plays such a vital role.

We will use examples from public health throughout this analysis because health outcomes are determined by a wide variety of factors, ranging from individual behavior to medical care to socioeconomic. The decision-making process involved in naming the health problem, and selecting a policy solution and intervention, provides us with excellent examples to use in exploring how SFA interacts with the public-policy process and why SFA needs to be interlaced into your policy efforts.

## II. Strategic Frame Analysis & Policy Making

### Where Does SFA Fit into our Strategic Plan? *Continued*

#### POLICY MAKING

Typically, policy making is described as an assembly line of the elements required to make policy. First the issue is placed on the agenda and the problem is defined; next the executive branches of government objectively examine alternative solutions based upon factual data, then select and refine them; then the executive agencies implement the solutions while interest groups often challenge the actions through the judicial branch; and sometimes the policy is evaluated and revised or scrapped.

However, scholars of the policy process, including such as Deborah Stone, say that this model fails to portray the essence of policy making, which she describes as “the struggle over ideas” [2002].

Ideas are a medium of exchange and a mode of influence even more powerful than money, votes and guns. Shared meanings motivate people to action and meld individual striving into collective action. Ideas are at the center of all political conflict. Policy making, in turn, is a constant struggle over the criteria for classification, the boundaries of categories, and the definition of ideals that guide the way people behave [Stone, 2002, 11].

Using Stone’s image of policymaking matched against the purpose and objectives of SFA, we can begin to see the importance of framing and how it applies broadly at every level of the policy-making process. We have said that framing is a communications tool that transmits conceptual constructs able to tap into people’s deeply held values and beliefs. We have also indicated that behind policymaking there is a contest over conflicting conceptions of the policy based on equally plausible values or ideas.

The question at each step of the process then becomes: *What frame transmits the policy with concepts that represent the values and worldviews of the public, policymakers and other key groups that you need to persuade?* Clearly, framing is the key mechanism that animates the policy process.

For example, the second step in policymaking is policy formulation and adoption. In this step, elected officials, House or Senate committees, or the President’s cabinet identify, evaluate and select from among alternative policy solutions. A rational, generally accepted view of decision-making requires the identification of objectives, the prediction of the consequences of alternative courses of action, and finally the evaluation of the possible consequences of each alternative.

*However, adhering to the definition of policymaking as a struggle over values and ideas, we can see that a rational step-by-step method for policy formulation based on objectivity, facts and reason is not in common use.* Humans use models, metaphors and other techniques to impose structure on the world and to reduce considerations. We use stories and exclude stories as we seek order. Policy formulation as a part of policy making is, once again, nothing more than reasoning by analogy, category and metaphor where those involved, based on their values and views, strategically select the data, facts and information that will be most persuasive in getting others to see a situation as one thing rather than another.

## II. Strategic Frame Analysis & Policy Making

### Where Does SFA Fit into our Strategic Plan? *Continued*

A good example of framing in relation to the description of health problems and the formulation of public-health policy is Nurit Guttman's [2000] explanation of the role of values that underlie various health interventions. Guttman explains that public-health interventions are not always chosen because they are effective but because they have a stronger link to certain social values over others [2000].

Health-education strategies that target individuals through persuasive techniques raise the issue of individual autonomy and privacy, because such strategies reduce the ability of individuals to freely choose among options [Guttman, 2000]. On the other hand, regulatory strategies restricting the marketplace or protecting the environment draw on the values of justice and equity and the requirement to provide people an opportunity to live in environments that promote health and minimize risk [Guttman, 2000]. Thus the regulatory restrictive health intervention is inherently associated with the values of self-actualization and the promotion of the public good [Guttman, 2000].

Various methods or strategies can be employed for the purpose of achieving the goals of a public-health communication intervention. Strategies may include the use of fear-arousal appeals, asking individuals to put social pressure on others, or teaching people skills such as the use of self-monitoring devices...Values clearly play a central role in the choice and application of such strategies...Questions about the morality of coercion, manipulation, deception, persuasion... typically involve a conflict between the values of individual freedom and self-determination, on the one hand and such values as social welfare, economic progress, or equal opportunity on the other hand [p. 80].

Milio, [1981] explains another frame and related underlying values to describe the selection and use of particular public-health strategies and policies.

The obligation of health policy, if it is to serve the health interests of the public, does not extend to assuring every individual the attainment of personally defined "health." In a democratic society that seeks at least internal equanimity, if not humanness and social justice, the responsibility of government is to establish environments that make possible an attainable level of health for the total population. This responsibility includes the assurance of environmental circumstances that do not impose more risks to health for some segments of the population than for others, for such inequality of risk would doom some groups of people – regardless of their choice – to a reduction in opportunities to develop their capacities [Milio, 1981, p.5].

The key point is that, while policymaking is a process, it is also a human endeavor and as such it is not based on objective and neutral standards. Behind every step in the policy process is a contest over equally plausible conceptions of the same abstract goal or value [Stone, 2002]. Remember, those participating in policymaking are also driven by their belief systems and ideology. These values and ideologies precede and shape the decisions along every step of the policy process.

## II. Strategic Frame Analysis & Policy Making

### Where Does SFA Fit into our Strategic Plan? *Continued*

#### STEPS IN POLICY MAKING

Now let's take a look at how framing plays a role in each step of the process. We will begin with step two in the policy-making process, leaving the first step for closer examination later.

**POLICY FORMULATION AND ADOPTION** occurs if an issue achieves agenda status. Policy formulation involves analyzing policy goals and solutions, the creation or identification of alternative recommendations to resolve or address the identified public problem, and the final selection of a policy.

The U.S. Surgeon General, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and most public-health experts support exchanging clean needles for used ones as a way to reduce the spread of H.I.V. infections. New Jersey – a state with more than 9,000 orphans who lost their mothers to AIDS, 26,000 people with AIDS, the nation's third-highest rate of intravenous HIV infection and the nation's highest rate of infection among women and children – not only refuses to pay for needles, it used undercover police to arrest those distributing clean needles to prevent AIDS activists from violating the state ban on distributing syringes [Clemons and McBeth, 2002].

Former Governor Christine Todd Whitman (R) was adamantly opposed to needle giveaways, claiming they sent the wrong message to children about drug use. Former President Bill Clinton (D) who admitted the benefits of a needle exchange program, also failed to support the effort due to pressure from the then Republican majority in Congress. [Clemons and McBeth, 2002].

AIDS activists lost this war of ideas that occurred at the policy-formulation stage of the process. Possible policy solutions considered were increased sex education in schools; education about and free distribution of condoms; and the distribution of needles to IV drug users [Clemons and McBeth, 2002].

Facts, reason and objectivity should have induced the elected officials to select a policy of needle exchange. However, these policies invoked a series of images and ideas antithetical to the values of powerful groups in the country such as the religious right [Clemons and McBeth, 2002.]. These same groups then framed the policy solutions in such a manner as to make them "about" the behaviors they recognize – illegal drug use, illicit sex, and addiction – as opposed to the prevention of HIV and the death of women and children. The framing of the problem limited the policy options.

**POLICY IMPLEMENTATION** occurs within organizations, typically administrative bureaucracies, directed to carry out adopted policies. Implementation at the national, state and local levels, begins once a policy has been legalized through a legislative act or a mandate from an official with authority to set policy. Administrators make decisions about how to deploy resources, human and financial, to enact a policy.

## II. Strategic Frame Analysis & Policy Making

### Where Does SFA Fit into our Strategic Plan? *Continued*

The war of ideas and values continues to play out even at this level because administrators must define and put into operation key terms and ideas in the legislative policy. There is often great disparity between the intentions of a policy and how it is carried out. The outcome will be affected by how the policy is interpreted; the values, ideologies, and views of the administrators; and the resources available and selected to implement the policy.

Consider the national policy that overhauled the welfare program during the Clinton administration. The phrase "welfare-to-work" was termed. The President's administration made a great effort to frame the legislation as a means to transition from welfare into jobs that allowed the recipient to establish a means of livelihood. Values expressed in this case might have been "doing-no-harm," or self-actualization.

But later, in the execution of the legislation, some states emphasized the transition off of welfare to jobs, while others chose to see the policy simply as a call to decrease welfare rolls. The values invoked in these kinds of programs might be described as market autonomy, utility, or efficiency.

Let us also reflect on the public-health mandate to decrease smoking as enunciated by the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in Healthy People 2010 [www.health.gov/healthypeople](http://www.health.gov/healthypeople). The goal is to reduce by 12% the number of adults over age 18 who smoke. The target date is 2010.

The Healthy People 2010 Website provides information for individuals on how to stop using tobacco. The federal agency also invested in public-service announcements featuring Bill Cosby on a variety of topics including the tobacco issue, where he admonishes individuals about the dangers of smoking. No mention is made on the Website of marketplace regulations or structural remedies, such as the tobacco lawsuits, banning smoking in public places, or the marketing of cigarettes.

Guttman [2000] says that, consciously or unconsciously, the implementation of public-health communication interventions involves the application of values. For instance, the execution of stop-smoking programs at the individual level assumes that individuals should be responsible for the solution to health problems and simply need to improve their refusal skills. On the other hand, the decision to implement a program at a societal-structural level identifies the locus of solution as external to the individual.

Social problems are time-, place- and context-bound. The way the health issue is framed as a problem (or not) is likely to reflect certain priorities or ideologies of the more dominant stakeholders. The mere identification of the problem itself presents a value judgment: the particular view of the ideal state is what determines what is considered problematic, thus requiring action. Is the problem conceived as poor motivation on the part of individuals who do not adopt recommended practices? Perhaps the problem is a result of structural socioeconomic conditions such as limited access of smokers to smoking-cessation programs. ...The locus problem can be identified at different levels, as a lifestyle issue versus an issue mainly associated with societal structures and distribution of resources [p.74].

## II. Strategic Frame Analysis & Policy Making

### Where Does SFA Fit into our Strategic Plan? *Continued*

#### POLICY EVALUATION

The final stage of the policy process determines what occurred as a result of the selection of a policy and makes corrections in the current policy or program as needed. Essentially, the final stage of the policy process assesses what has occurred as a result of the implementation of the legislative policy.

Just as there is no escape from values into an objective, fact-based mode for selecting one policy in lieu of another, there is also no neutral, rational, objective way to measure and calculate the benefits or harms resulting from a policy. All the same considerations of values-based framing come into play in this seemingly "objective" phase as well.

When beginning to evaluate a policy, several pieces of information must be established: the goals or original objectives of the policy, a means by which to measure the extent to which goals have been met, and the target of the program or whom the program was intended to affect.

Assembling this information involves value-laden decision-making including the views, and values of the organizations involved; the analysts, clients or the target population; and the general public, who may be paying for the program with their tax dollars.

When assembling the indicators of success for a policy evaluation, priorities and values become important. A particular indicator that may gauge success by one value-laden goal [efficiency] may not capture the success of the policy for another goal [community solidarity] [Guttman, 2000].

An example provided by Deborah Stone shows us how a value-laden evaluative criterion figures in something as seemingly straightforward as measuring the efficiency of a library [Stone, 2002]. Scholars agree that an efficiently run library is one that builds up a good collection of books and that a particular library in California might be more efficient if it replaced some highly paid professionals and spent the money on building the collection of books [Stone, 2002].

It is possible to imagine several challenges to the evaluative criterion of efficiency. Some citizens may value the resources available in the library in the form of storytelling for children, or jobs for teenagers [Stone, 2002]. Some might debate what a "good book collection" might include [Stone, 2002]. Finally, others might say an efficient library is one that would save the users time by providing the maximum amount of assistance while the patron is using the services [Stone, 2002].

On the use of efficiency as an evaluative criterion, Stone says it "is always a contestable concept. To go beyond the vague slogans and apply the concept to a concrete policy choice requires making assumptions about who and what counts as important. The answers built into supposedly technical analyses of efficiency are nothing more than political claims" [p. 65]. "By offering different assumptions, sides in a conflict can portray their preferred outcomes as being most efficient" [Stone, 2002 p.66].

## II. Strategic Frame Analysis & Policy Making

### Where Does SFA Fit into our Strategic Plan? *Continued*

Ultimately, *evaluation* of a policy becomes nothing more than a selection among criteria based on values and ideologies. In the example below, one can see clearly how the selection of the evaluation criterion extricates different values.

[In] ... an intervention to prevent adolescent pregnancy that chose the strategy of persuading adolescent girls to use a contraceptive implant, a likely evaluation criterion would be the relative frequency of pregnancies before and after the intervention in the target population. For stakeholders who define the problem as based on sexual promiscuity or for those who believe the girls engage in abusive sexual relationships because of low self-esteem however, this criterion would be irrelevant because these adolescent girls may continue to engage in premarital sex and may have simply adopted enhanced contraceptive practices. Stakeholders who are interested in preventing youth from being infected with sexually transmitted diseases are not likely to find this criterion satisfactory. The contraceptive implant may protect the adolescents from pregnancy, but they may continue to be exposed to infection [Guttman, 2000].

#### PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION/GAINING AGENDA STATUS

We saved the first step in the policy process for last because it is here, more than at any other stage, that framing becomes critical. The first step involves getting a problem onto the radar screen of the legislative body that must deal with that issue [Clemons & McBeth, 2001]. Problems gain legislative attention in many ways, but typically gaining agenda status happens once there has been a value-driven, subjective determination that an issue is now a “public problem.”

The question then becomes: Why do some issues become public problems reaching agenda status and others do not? The answer has to do with frame construction in the sense that an issue must be constructed so that it is perceived as qualifying as a social problem (Best, 1995). This is a key objective in getting the attention of the legislative body in charge. This assertion is derived from the notion that issues get attention when they are labeled as social or public problems (Best, 1995).

How an issue becomes labeled as a social problem is not based entirely on objective measures of the severity of the condition but rather on a host of factors related to how society perceives or constructs the information presented regarding the issue (Best, 1995).

Accordingly, SFA is applied to help determine the organizing constructs or values that may be used to frame an issue in order to make it known as a social problem that then captures the minds and concerns of the public and its elected officials.

First, a few ideas on why a social condition is not automatically considered a social problem and why it must be considered as one before it can become a legislative priority.

Joel Best asserts that until something is labeled a “social problem” it does not rise to a level of importance sufficient to attract the attention of the public and policymakers. His view is called the subjective, constructionist perspective because it says a social condition is a product of something defined or constructed by society through social activities (Best, 1995).



## II. Strategic Frame Analysis & Policy Making

### Where Does SFA Fit into our Strategic Plan? *Continued*

For example, when a news conference is held on crack houses or a demonstration on litter, or investigative reporters publish stories, or when advocacy groups publish a report, they are constructing or framing the issue using claims that help build the issue into a social problem.

Malcolm Spector and John Kitsuse [1977] use the term “claims making” to define the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions that result in social problems.

According to all of these definitions, it does not matter if the objective condition exists or even if it may be severe. It only matters that people make claims about it in a way that invokes a subjective mental construct that will frame the issue as a public problem of magnitude worthy of attention. In other words, social problems are the result of claims-making that frames the issue in a way that triggers organizing principles attached to an individual's deeply held worldviews and values (Best, 1995).

Claims-making draws attention to social conditions and shapes our sense of the nature of the problem (Best, 1995). Through rhetoric, every social condition can be constructed as many different social problems. A claims-makers' success [or framing] depends in part upon whether the claims persuade others that X is a social problem or that Y offers the solution (Best, 1995).

In the area of public health, the construction of a problem explicates embedded values and ideals of those who “made” the health problem in the first place [Guttman, 2000]. The results of that construction further determine whether the problem gets on the agenda, as well as the range of policy solutions that appear natural or appropriate. For instance, using claims that frame the problem at the organizational level assumes a major cause of the problem is based in organizational arrangements or practices [Guttman, 2000]. The problem of an overweight America is defined as people's lack of time or facilities at work to exercise, or an absence of food at work that is high in nutritional value [Guttman, 2002].

Identifying the problem of overweight adults at this marketplace level may involve a frame that links the problem to industry's quest for profits through the marketing of inexpensive food products high in calories instead of nutritious products that are more expensive and thus made less accessible [Guttman, 2002]. In this instance, the description of the problem involves a frame including claims that value the public good over market autonomy.

In order to evaluate the relative merits of different frames applied to the social problems we wish to take into the policy process, we need to ask the following kinds of questions: Would such a frame make this problem a public issue that gets the attention of a legislature? In the instance above, involving the problem of obesity, we would ask: If the issue is framed in this way, would the legislature then consider marketplace restrictions on advertising or regulations on food content?

## II. Strategic Frame Analysis & Policy Making

Where Does SFA Fit into our Strategic Plan? *Continued*

### THIS PRESENTATION WAS MEANT TO LEAVE YOU WITH TWO “TAKE HOME” LESSONS.

1. Strategic frame analysis [SFA] is a critical tool in the larger public-policy strategy that your organization must implement in order to eventually win approval for your policies.
2. The use of SFA animates the public-policy process because policy making, like SFA, is driven by subjective value systems, worldviews, and ideas.

*This section was developed for the FrameWorks Institute and the Center for Communications and Community/UCLA by Lauri Andress, MPH, JD, Texas Program for Society and Health, Rice University and Doctoral Candidate, University of Texas School of Public Health.*

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### III. Thinking Strategically About Framing Elements of the Frame

#### CONTEXT

##### WHAT RESEARCH SUGGESTS ABOUT THIS ELEMENT OF THE FRAME

- Context establishes the cause of the problem and who is responsible for solving it.
- Context can further systems thinking and minimizes the reduction of social problems to individual solutions.
- Context must be built into the frame with the introduction of the problem.

Context is one of the most difficult elements of the frame to describe, and one of the most important to get right. In FrameWorks trainings, we explain context by first showing the group a picture of cows chewing grass in a field. We explain that some cows are getting sick, and we ask the group to speculate about the cause. Invariably, people work within the frame that has been given them; they ask if the farmer gave the cows bad feed, or if the farmer is experienced, or if the cows have wandered into an adjacent field, or if the cows caught a disease from other cows. We then add a backdrop that shows an urban landscape, with smoke stacks belching fumes just over the cows' heads, and we ask the group again: Why do you think the cows are getting sick? This time, of course, they are able to broaden the scope of their speculation to include environmental causes, and to ask about the relationship of the cows to their air, water and soil. This exercise brings home the importance of getting context into the initial definition of the problem.

Context provides more than details about individuals; it focuses on issues and trends that are common to groups. And to identify trends requires systems-level thinking. This means that you must be strategic in identifying the problem you want to communicate as one that involves the entire community. The way you identify the problem makes all the difference in how people are able to view your solutions. When people understand issues as *individual* problems, they may feel critical or compassionate, but they won't see *policies and programs* as the solutions. For example, the dominant frame for children's issues is a needy child and a parent, and this two-person frame sets up the idea that the parent, and the parent alone, is responsible for the child's needs. However, if you provide context and broaden the frame to include other parents, the community, business leaders, the mayor, etc., you define the problem as public in nature and expand the possibilities for meeting children's needs.

To go back to the FrameWorks training example, systems-level thinking forces us not to view the cows within the narrow frame of the field and the farmer. It gives us more options in defining the problem and in creating appropriate solutions. Without systems thinking, we are forced into narrow solutions: "Fix the parents in order to fix the kids."

Context is one of the missing ingredients that distinguish episodic from thematic reporting, important distinctions for community advocates to understand. Stanford University political psychologist Shanto Iyengar explains that "the essential difference between episodic and thematic framing is that episodic framing depicts concrete events that illustrate issues, while thematic framing presents collective or general evidence." Episodic reporting is heavily reliant on case studies, human-interest or event-oriented reporting, and depicts public issues

### III. Thinking Strategically About Framing Elements of the Frame *Continued*

as the plight of an individual homeless person, an airline bombing, etc. By contrast, thematic coverage places the individual incident within long-term or national trends. It explores causes and effects, and explains, rather than dramatizes. Context defines an issue as “public” in nature, and therefore appropriately solved in the realm of policy.

#### PUBLIC-HEALTH EXAMPLE

The City of Houston had a measles epidemic in the late 1980s. Initial media coverage tended to focus on each case or each episode – the age of the child, the situation of the parents, their ethnicity or health status. When the epidemic moved beyond the 50th case with no clear end in sight, the reporters looked for new angles. It was at this point that the tone of the stories became thematic. For example, stories began to examine how the City of Houston health department paid for vaccines. This provided a wider focus that helped to expose the issue of pharmaceutical pricing, as well as manufacture and supply of vaccines. The story began to focus on limited resources for free immunizations. The measles epidemic in Houston became a part of a larger national issue. By connecting the Houston epidemic to a larger context, Houstonians began to perceive the complexity of their epidemic and related issues. The problem of measles thus had two solutions – one individual in nature [vaccinations] and the other public policies to address the supply and pricing of vaccine.

#### VIOLENCE-PREVENTION EXAMPLE

One of the best experiments in the use of context comes from the violence-prevention arena. In comparing the distance between the way public-health advocates understood violence prevention and the way media depicted it, researchers were able to identify the missing contextual elements of the story. Crime coverage was highly episodic, stressing randomness rather than root causes and suggesting criminal-justice remedies rather than preventive policies. Researchers sought to replace this kind of coverage with a public-health model: “Each violent incident that takes place in a community has more of the characteristics of a deadly communicable disease than of an isolated event involving the individual participants.” To redirect public-opinion toward public health remedies, the researchers suggested that reporters ask and report on the following questions: (1) Where did the perpetrator get the weapon?; (2) Did the victim and perpetrator know one another?; (3) Were alcohol or drugs involved?; and, (4) What were the consequences and costs of incarceration to their families, to society? The thinking was that if these questions were woven into the article, crime would be contextualized and lead to the consideration of policy options. (see Berkeley Media Studies Group. January 1997, Issue 1. Berkeley: Berkeley Media Studies Group).

### III. Thinking Strategically About Framing

Elements of the Frame *Continued*

#### HOW TO USE CONTEXT EFFECTIVELY

- Link current data and messages to long-term trends.
- Interpret the data: Tell the public what is at stake and what it means to neglect this problem.
- Define the problem so that community influences and opportunities are apparent – connect the dots, both verbally and in illustrations.
- Focus on how well the community/state is doing in addressing this problem, not on how well individuals are addressing it.
- Connect the episodes of your community's issues to root causes, conditions, and trends with which people are familiar.
- Assign responsibility.
- Present a solution.

## III. Thinking Strategically About Framing Elements of the Frame *Continued*

### NUMBERS

#### WHAT RESEARCH SUGGESTS ABOUT THIS ELEMENT OF THE FRAME

- Once a frame is established, it will “trump” numbers.
- Most people cannot judge the size or meaning of numbers; they need cues.
- Numbers alone often fail to create “pictures in our heads.”

An important finding from the cognitive sciences is the ability of the frame to overpower the numbers that follow. In other words, if the facts don't fit the frame, it's the facts that are rejected, not the frame. Confronted with facts that one might presume would cause the group to reconsider its position, people opt instead to adhere to their original position and to ignore the conflicting data.

As many have come to realize, both numbers and narratives evoke frames. The trick is how to combine them so that they work together to evoke a frame of collective responsibility and public policy. Here are some simple suggestions for integrating narrative and numbers:

*First, never provide numbers without telling what they mean.* While scientists concerned with objectivity may feel it important to “put the numbers out there and let the facts fall where they may,” they are setting the stage for public misunderstanding, public boredom, or public manipulation by those who do not hold back from interpretation.

Moreover, the ratio of numbers to narrative should be relatively low. Embed the statistics in a tight little story that tells what is happening, how big a problem this is and what can and should be done about it.

#### ENVIRONMENT – WEAK EXAMPLE

At current consumption rates, we put back in the air each year about 100,000 years of stored carbon. In the last 150 years we have put about 290 billion tonnes (gigatonnes or Gt) into the air. Amidst the claimed uncertainties about the climate-change phenomenon, there is no dispute that these emissions have caused significant increases in atmospheric concentrations of CO<sub>2</sub>. Today's CO<sub>2</sub> levels are about 370 parts per million (ppm), about 30 percent higher than the pre-industrial level of 280 ppm.

#### ENVIRONMENT – BETTER EXAMPLE

Humankind is altering the atmosphere at a rapid pace. Since industrialization began just 150 years ago, concentrations of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere have increased by almost one-third. This is happening because burning fossil fuels releases carbon into the atmosphere, carbon that it took the Earth millions of years to bury away. Each year we are using 100,000 years worth of stored carbon. Even once we shift away from fossil fuels, it will take centuries for Earth to store the carbon away again.

### III. Thinking Strategically About Framing Elements of the Frame *Continued*

*Second, try to provide the interpretation first, then the data.* That way, your numbers connect to an idea. By raising the broader principle first, you allow people to hear your numbers as evidence, not as raw data.

#### CHILDREN'S ORAL-HEALTH EXAMPLE

"Community fluoride protection costs less per person than a single filling. Water fluoridation is one of the best public-health investments we can make. Every \$1 invested in community-water fluoridation in yields annual savings of \$38 in dental treatment of cavities." (*Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*)

It is imperative that those who seek to engage and educate the public find ways to help people imagine the reality the numbers represent, so that they can appropriately assess what's at stake. The Advocacy Institute and Berkeley Media Studies Group have pioneered an approach to communicating statistics that they call "social math." By this, they mean "making large numbers comprehensible and compelling by placing them in a social context that provides meaning.

#### PUBLIC-HEALTH EXAMPLE

"The correlation between violent media and aggression is larger than the effect that wearing a condom has on decreasing the risk of HIV,...larger than the correlation between exposure to lead and decreased IQ levels in kids,...larger than the effects of exposure to asbestos, larger than the effect of secondhand smoke on cancer." (*Brad Bushman, Professor of Psychology, Iowa State University*)

#### INTERNATIONAL EXAMPLE

"Two years ago in Nigeria, an AK-47 could be had in exchange for two cows. Now the price is down to one cow. And in the Sudan, you can get an AK-47 for a chicken." (*Marie Griesgraber, Oxfam America*)

#### HEALTH EXAMPLE

In the following quote, Surgeon General David Satcher helps bridge from a familiar issue, already deemed a public-health crisis, to one he would like to propel onto the public agenda; that is, he makes the link between medicine and dentistry and implies that dental care is just as important as medical care:

"There are 100 million people in this county without access to fluoridated water and over 100 million people in this country without dental health insurance. For every child who is uninsured for medical care, there are two to three children who are uninsured for dental care...."

"Few Smiling About USA's Dental Health," *USA Today*, October 9, 2000

### III. Thinking Strategically About Framing

Elements of the Frame *Continued*

#### HOW TO USE NUMBERS EFFECTIVELY

- Use numbers sparingly. When you use dramatic numbers, you may have the inadvertent effect of making the problem seem too big, too scary, or too far away.
- Provide the meaning first, then the numbers. Use social math to reinforce that meaning.
- Use numbers strategically: not simply to establish the size of the problem, but to convey the cost of ignoring it.
- Use numbers to underscore efficacy, demonstrating cost-effectiveness.



### III. Thinking Strategically About Framing Elements of the Frame *Continued*

#### MESSENGERS

##### WHAT RESEARCH SUGGESTS ABOUT THIS ELEMENT OF THE FRAME

- The choice of messengers is as important as the message itself.
- The message is reinforced or undermined by the choice of messenger.
- Knowledge and trustworthiness are critical to public acceptance, not likeability or familiarity.
- Some messengers are not credible on certain issues because we assume they are biased toward a perspective.
- Unlikely allies can prompt public reconsideration of an issue or recommendation.
- Some messengers convey specific frames.

Choice of messenger is one of the most important tactical choices to be made before taking an issue public. Messengers are the people who become the physical symbol of the issue — they sign op/eds, appear at news conferences and before civic groups, speak on TV and radio talk shows, and testify at hearings. They answer the question, “who says this is a problem I should pay attention to?” Messages can be reinforced or undermined by their attachment to a spokesperson. Skill is required in matching the message to the messenger, and in anticipating the impact of particular messengers on public thinking.

The problem inherent in the choice of messenger is that, without a careful appraisal of the match of messenger and message, you are likely to reinforce one of these negative roles for the public, inadvertently allowing the public or critics to dismiss their testimony. In our research on global warming, for example, environmentalists were less credible than those who were not perceived as having a vested interest, or suspected of being “extreme” on environmental issues. On children’s oral health, dentists were deemed less objective than pediatricians or school nurses. Does this mean that environmentalists and dentists should quit advocacy? No, that’s not what we’re suggesting at all. But the choice of the lead spokesperson, the surrogate for the issue, should be made tactically, taking into account the way the public is likely to read the combination of the message and the messenger. How, then, should they weigh in on the issue? They can wield their professional authority in support of the out-front spokesperson.

Finally, messengers convey authority. They help establish the boundaries of the conversation, just as do other frame elements. The choice of public officials as spokespersons on foreign-policy issues, for example, signals to the public that ordinary people should leave the discussion to experts. In one study of foreign-policy news coverage, FrameWorks found that the only time ordinary people were used in the news was when the story was about their lack of knowledge of international issues or about their lack of interest. The messengers were chosen specifically to reinforce the frame.

### III. Thinking Strategically About Framing Elements of the Frame *Continued*

#### PUBLIC-HEALTH EXAMPLE

In Texas, the local public-health officers sought to influence the allocation of resources in the legislature to obtain additional dollars for public health. That year all of the speakers at legislative hearings were directors of local and county public-health departments. Later, many legislative aides and their bosses said that the testimony did not help persuade them because these individuals were seen as having a vested interest in obtaining more money for their departments instead of as representing the public-health needs of their jurisdictions. While listening to the testimony and thinking about it later, the legislators could not hear the truth of the words because the messengers were discounted.

#### HOUSING EXAMPLE

In a now famous advocacy effort, organizers helped mothers in Chicago's public housing (the Henry Horner Mothers Guild) create a video documenting the slum conditions that had been allowed to continue without the city's intervention. The mothers themselves narrated the film and served as "tour guides" through the Project, effectively establishing themselves as responsible tenants, not victims. The mothers were portrayed as articulate, responsible and organized. The city, by contrast, was portrayed as a derelict, negligent landlord. Not only did these messengers provoke sympathy, but they commanded respect for fighting back against injustice. The short video was delivered as a video news release (VNR) to TV stations in Chicago and widely used; in effect, these messengers stayed in control of their own story.

#### CHILDREN'S ORAL-HEALTH EXAMPLE

Because dentists are perceived as too vested in dentistry to be objective about the issue of children's oral health, other messengers needed to be identified. In the Washington State "Watch Your Mouth" campaign, pediatricians and school nurses were used effectively as the advocates for better oral-health policies. In both cases, these messengers brought important framing connections associated with their professions. Pediatricians helped emphasize that oral health is part of overall health, a problem identified in the communications research. And school nurses took the issue into the schools, connecting health to achievement and, further, to the locus of public responsibility for children. Both messengers were unexpected, knowledgeable, trustworthy, and furthered additional framing goals.

#### HOW TO USE MESSENGERS EFFECTIVELY

- Use messengers who reinforce the systemic connection and underscore the severity of the problem.
- Use spokespeople who establish the problem as one that is public in nature.
- Test your chosen messengers for public perceptions of their knowledge and trustworthiness.
- Consider carefully the symbolic value of your chosen messengers – business executives bring the frame of managerial competence, innovators bring a solutions frame, etc.
- Use unlikely allies.
- Use advocates and those closest to the issue carefully, understanding the public's assumption that they are already vested in the issue.

### III. Thinking Strategically About Framing

#### Elements of the Frame *Continued*

## VISUALS

#### WHAT RESEARCH SAYS ABOUT THIS ELEMENT OF THE FRAME

- Pictures trigger the same models and frames as words.
- Pictures can undermine a carefully constructed verbal frame.
- Pictures are visual short hands.
- Close-up shots emphasize the personal and conceal environmental and systems-level influences.
- The narrower the frame, the less opportunity for systems-level thinking

We have been concentrating on words and how they trigger models and frames. But don't underestimate the power of visuals. After all, it has been said, "a picture is worth a thousand words." Pictures trigger the same mental models and frames as words. It is important to be aware of this, so that the frames introduced by the pictures do not work against the frames introduced by the words. Advocates often say that they cannot control the pictures at news conferences, but to some extent they can—in the way they stage the news conference and in what they suggest to the media as the visuals to accompany the story. Furthermore, advocates produce many other vehicles – such as Websites, advertising, brochures, fact sheets, action alerts and reports – in which they can control all the visual elements—and therefore the messages they send.

What, then, are the factors to consider when planning a visual, whether it is a film clip, photograph, illustration, or graphic (including maps and charts)? First, it's important to anticipate the visuals or symbols that will be applied to your issue if you do nothing to control them. More than likely, these will be generic images and will trigger frames that are traditionally associated with that issue. These stock images can reinforce stereotypes, emphasize dramatic episodes and details to the detriment of context and trends, exclude solutions and disperse accountability.

Second, recognize that choosing the "right" visual is only the first step. Even image placement can reinforce or undermine your message. When you orchestrate a series of dire-problem pictures and leave the solutions photos to the end, you promote a frame of despair or intractability, regardless of what your word frames attempt to convey. Location, size, and color can all affect the impact of your visuals. Images seem more important when they are centered, in the foreground, brightly colored, sharply defined, or overlapping with other elements. Human figures, cultural symbols or icons also signify importance. Consider the layout of your document as a whole, or the sequencing of your photos on Websites and in film and video.

### III. Thinking Strategically About Framing Elements of the Frame *Continued*

#### YOUTH EXAMPLE

FrameWorks' research suggests that showing youth involved in sports, volunteer, and extracurricular activities like performance arts can overcome the default frame of the lazy, self-centered teenager. Assessments of youth shown involved in these activities were universally positive. "When I see a girl in sports, I immediately think she has a chance to succeed in life," explained a father of a teen in a focus group conducted for FrameWorks. Reacting to a picture of a young boy volunteering at what appeared to be a soup kitchen, one mother commented, "He is going to be an asset to his community just because he is already at a young age involved in community."

#### CHILDREN'S ORAL-HEALTH EXAMPLE

When the illustration for children's oral health is a parent and child, or a dentist and a child, community-wide and policy efforts to improve oral health are hard to visualize. Perhaps the cleverest use of visuals to advance children's oral health comes from the Sierra Health Foundation's news conference to call attention to the Surgeon General's Report on Oral Health. The foundation supplied new B-roll (background footage) to local news stations that featured drinking water coming out of the tap and showed pie charts of trends in fluoridation across California counties. Another strategic decision made by the foundation was its choice of location for the news conference: the State Capitol. Even though no legislation was pending, the reporter delivered the news with the Capitol as backdrop, reinforcing the notion that the issue under discussion was authentically a public responsibility.

#### HOW TO USE VISUALS EFFECTIVELY

- Avoid traditional images that have dominated the news regarding your issue.
- Avoid close-up shots of individuals unless they serve your framing goals, as they tend to assign responsibility to those individuals.
- Suggest the public nature of the problem with pictures of public and community settings.
- Use sequence and placement of photos to demonstrate cause and effect, and trends instead of isolated events.

### III. Thinking Strategically About Framing Elements of the Frame *Continued*

#### METAPHORS AND SIMPLIFYING MODELS

##### WHAT RESEARCH SUGGESTS ABOUT THIS FRAME ELEMENT

- Metaphors and models complete ways of thinking that include patterns of reasoning.
- They allow us to make extensive inferences beyond the words actually used.
- They are highly quotable for news media.
- They offer effective alternatives to other storytelling devices.

According to researchers associated with Cultural Logic, numerous studies in the cognitive sciences have established that both the development and the learning of complex, abstract or technical concepts typically rely on analogies. “An explanation that reduces a complex problem to a simple, concrete analogy or metaphor contributes to understanding by helping people organize information into a clear picture in their heads, including facts and ideas previously learned but not organized in a coherent way,” says psychological anthropologist Axel Aubrun. Once this analogical picture has been formed, it becomes the basis for new reasoning about the topic. Better understanding also leads to an increase in engagement and motivation.

Cognitive linguist George Lakoff introduces the notion that frames derive from a vast conceptual system whose unit is metaphor. “Metaphors as linguistic expressions are possible precisely because there are metaphors in a person’s conceptual system.” The systematization of this vast conceptual framework allows individuals to understand new information in the context of what they already know to be familiar, and to reject information that does not fit. “Metaphors may create ... social realities for us,” according to Lakoff and Johnson (1979:10). “A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action. Indeed, their very purpose is to connect random information to myths, ideologies and stereotypes that allow the individual to process and store the new with the old. In this sense, frames reinforce worldview (Lakoff, 1996: 374).

##### ENVIRONMENTAL EXAMPLE

“The problem is that some people think we’re motorcycles without engines, but the truth is that we’re like hikers on wheels.”

Gary Sprung, Director of a mountain-biking group as quoted in “Mountain Bikers Up Against Calif. Conservationists,” *The Washington Post*, October 2, 2002, A3.

The metaphors chosen to describe the issue drive public reaction and reasoning. For example, the “horse race” metaphor applied to political elections has been shown to reduce attention to specific issues in favor of character, strategy and poll results

Because every word that we speak, and every image that we produce, is linked in different ways to many frames and models (words and images in fact trigger the models), language and imagery will always manipulate. That is unavoidable. By bringing a level of analysis to these metaphors and models, however, advocates will be less likely to be caught by correspondences or conclusions that are evoked by the language and imagery we or someone else use, but that in fact work against the policies or positions we are advocating.

### III. Thinking Strategically About Framing Elements of the Frame *Continued*

Often, when advocates take on an issue that is well established in the public discourse, they find they must evaluate and address the metaphors and models most closely associated with that issue and their unintended consequences.

#### CHILDCARE EXAMPLE

Lakoff and his colleague Joseph Grady have demonstrated that, when adults think of children as “precious objects,” childcare is often conceptualized as a container that provides protection for the child. This, then, takes on a number of pernicious “entailments,” or consequences, that come bundled with the metaphor and infect our reasoning:

CHILDCARE AS CONTAINER FRAME	
Childcare center	Container
Children	Packages
Leaving children at center	Putting objects in a container
Caring for children	Handling objects
Childcare workers	Package handlers

All of this reasoning is hidden from both the reasoner and the observer. Yet it is precisely this hidden process that yields an overt opinion that there is no problem with paying childcare workers low wages. Once the mental mapping has taken place, the reasoner is able to quickly sort through any new information and to come up with a “logical” assessment.

#### ENTAILMENTS OF THE CHILD CARE CENTER AS CONTAINER FRAME

If childcare is package handling:

- Is it a highly skilled job?
- Do you need to hire highly skilled workers?
- Does it pay workers well?
- Does it need to pay well?
- Does the environment at the facility matter?
- Do the relationships between handlers affect the package?

Hence, the difficulty of getting “quality” into the public debate over daycare, as it is currently conceptualized. The power of the metaphor is that it effectively shuts some considerations out of the frame, and highlights others – safety, for example, is in the foregrounded in this metaphorical reasoning.

Simplifying models are a kind of metaphorical frame that both capture the essence of a scientific concept, and have a high capacity for spreading through a population. Teaching with analogies is a familiar strategy in educational contexts. Common examples of analogies that serve to teach basic science concepts include “the heart is a pump,” “the eye is a camera,” “the cell is a factory,” “the kidney is a waste filter,” “photosynthesis is like baking bread,” “an electric circuit is like water circuit,” “the brain is a computer,” etc.

An example from the advocacy literature helps us understand the power of these “simplifying models.” In talking with hundreds of people about how they think about air quality and climate, Cultural Logic researchers Axel Aubrun and Joe Grady identified the dominance of one particular model that served to anchor their understanding about ozone depletion.

### III. Thinking Strategically About Framing Elements of the Frame *Continued*

There is no reason that ozone depletion should have more salience and energy behind it as an issue than global warming or water pollution. Yet it does. Aubrun and Grady conclude that it is because of the simplifying model “the ozone hole in the atmosphere is like a hole in the roof.” As they point out, the fact that you have a hole in your roof makes other policy distractions less viable. When politicians tell you that you might lose your job or your economic well-being if you stop to fix the ozone problem through environmental regulation, this makes little sense to people. Why? Because the two consequences are seen as false trade-offs. If you have a hole in your roof, you don’t go out and take a job and ignore the roof; you have to fix your roof. By contrast, Aubrun and Grady found that “global warming,” while highly visualized by people and somewhat understood, suffered from having no working model in people’s minds. Simplifying models are easier for nonspecialists to understand than the science from which they are drawn. They yield a sketch, rather than a fully detailed and complex drawing, but they still educate in the right direction, when used ethically.

Metaphors and simplifying models help us understand a problem and its associate solutions by giving us a simple way of understanding how something works.

#### INTERNATIONAL EXAMPLE

When Congressman Joe Lieberman wanted to question President Bush’s leadership on global environmental treaties, he used a metaphor:

“Bonn surprised people...The feeling was that, if the United States took its football and left the field, the game wouldn’t go forward. But the rest of the nations of the world found their own football, and they completed the game. They left the United States on the sidelines.”

Joseph Lieberman, *Los Angeles Times*, July 25, 2001

In order to analyze the impact of this metaphor, advocates should evaluate the following questions:

#### ENTAILMENTS OF THE PRESIDENT AS TEAM LEADER FRAME

- What kind of player takes the football and leaves the field?
- What kind of player sits on the sidelines?
- Is this player a leader?
- Would you want this player on your side?
- Would you entrust your country/world to such a leader?

#### USING MODELS & METAPHORS EFFECTIVELY

- Use metaphors and models to help people understand how your issue works.
- In general, use metaphors and models that connect the issue to larger systems.
- Use metaphors and models that emphasize prevention and/or causality.
- Examine carefully the entailments of metaphors being used to communicate about your issue – you may be able to identify vulnerabilities in the metaphor. But be careful in examining the entailments in the reframing metaphors you develop as well.

## III. Thinking Strategically About Framing

### Elements of the Frame *Continued*

#### tone

##### WHAT RESEARCH SUGGESTS ABOUT THIS ELEMENT OF THE FRAME

- People toggle between a "rhetorical mode" and a "reasonable mode" of thought and discourse on this issue.
- Rhetorical mode polarizes people, turning many off, and is characteristic of much political and media discourse.
- Reasonable mode, which reflects more typical individual thinking, makes people more open to scientific findings and practical problem-solving.
- Extreme statements and partisan attacks turn many potential supporters off and do little overall to increase support for solutions on the issue.
- Advocates often lose credibility when they talk in highly partisan terms.
- The label "advocate" itself is somewhat polarizing, since it sometimes suggests dogmatism and a one-issue identity.

The tone of the communications can provide powerful cues capable of effectively and efficiently communicating (or hijacking) a frame. Choosing and controlling tone, then, is as important as deploying more obvious frame elements such as messengers, visuals, or metaphors. Since we can't readily predict which element of the frame is likely to strike the audience first, we need to control all elements. If the visuals, messengers, metaphors, and tone of the communications have all been carefully constructed to work together, the odds increase that the communications will connect to the desired existing internalized frame.

What exactly is tone and how does it qualify as a frame element?

Tone refers to the style, mood, manners or philosophical outlook of a communication: shrill, liberal, moderate, abrasive, etc. We owe this observation to our colleagues at Cultural Logic, who first brought this element to our attention. On social issues, we identify two categories of tone: reasonable and rhetorical.

As Cultural Logic points out,

- People can be both reasonable and opinionated on any given topic.
- When they are in "reasonable mode," they are more likely to be open to new information and to problem-solving.
- Rhetorical mode is more overtly political or ideological. It reminds people of their hardened positions and political identities, if they have them, and turns many people off.
- Experts and advocates lose credibility when they talk in rhetorical mode, as this violates the "disinterested" requirement for effective messengers.

Recent FrameWorks research – including cognitive elicitations, focus groups and the priming survey – was consistent in showing that when communications about the environment become too extreme, too dire, or too partisan, large segments of the public are likely to tune out and dismiss the message, and few new converts are likely to be made. A subsequent survey tested the impact of tone explicitly. The results were stunning. When we framed



### III. Thinking Strategically About Framing Elements of the Frame *Continued*

environmental issues by reminding people that the Administration was full of oil-company executives or that Congress was in the pocket of the auto lobby, we lost on average 9 points over the same critique, but framed more neutrally to emphasize the need for long-term, not short-term, planning and incentives for innovation. The lesson is simple: On those issues where many people already see themselves as falling on one side or the other, and when they get cues that the dialogue is about that divide, they stop thinking about the issue itself, and start thinking more generally – and usually less productively – in terms of their own political or factional identities. Even potential supporters may be turned off by overtly political discussions and made skeptical by melodramatic warnings.

When people are presented with a reasonable discussion of the problem, its causes and the potential solutions, they are much better at listening to and using new information. Their "decent person" instincts kick in and they begin thinking about how to solve the problem rather than how to identify the hidden agendas of the messengers. Engaging Americans in "can do" thinking is especially effective. Strongly worded or overtly partisan rhetoric may energize the partisan base and get the attention of policymakers, but it is ineffective as a tool for moving most Americans toward solutions-based thinking on specific issues like child and family policy.

#### *Why does tone work this way?*

We owe to our colleague Pamela Morgan an explanation of this phenomenon. Put simply, rhetorical tone communicates the frame "politics." What do we know about the internalized frames people hold about politics? For most people, there are very few positive frames associated with politics. Politics is a cynical, manipulative game. It's a horse race where people will say (or do) anything to win. To say that something is "just politics," for example, is to undermine the reality of the issue or the position. In effect, by using the rhetorical tone, you communicate to your audience that the specific issue position you espouse is largely a pawn in the old political game of them versus us. In order for your audience to decide how to process your communication, then, all they have to do is decide whether you are one of us or one of them. Cognitive connection made. End of opportunity for political learning.

#### *How does this play out in practice?*

Communicators fall into the trap of using rhetorical tone when they say things like:

- We accuse the Administration of breaking its promise to invest in education.
- The President has betrayed our trust by revoking his commitment to early education.
- The legislature is squandering the taxpayers' resources on the military instead of investing in our long-term homeland needs.
- The governor is raiding the tobacco-settlement piggybank to fund his agribusiness friends, not poor families.

These statements strongly imply a motive on the speaker's part, as well as on those attacked. The motive appears to be "politics as usual" and is more likely to communicate that frame than the ones the speaker had intended: corruption, betrayal and dishonesty.

### III. Thinking Strategically About Framing Elements of the Frame *Continued*

How, then, can you critique positions with which you disagree and still win adherents? We suggest you first try to appeal to people in their roles as reasonable people trying to do the right thing. This dictates a “problem-solving tone” of respect and engagement:

- Investing in education requires long-term planning, not short-term fixes. You wouldn’t plan for your own child’s college education the way the Administration is proposing to finance education reform. We need to send our elected representatives back to do their homework.
- The truth is that this plan for early education offers too little, too late. This plan is not going to get our children what they need to succeed.

Criticize the plan, not the people. Demonstrate its inadequacy. Question a proposal’s competence, its efficacy, its limited perspective and/or its values. But don’t question motive, unless you have very, very good reason to do so. Go for the incompetence of the proposal, not its intent. Don’t demonize. Demonstrate inconsistency and illogic, not hypocrisy. Don’t fall into the trap of implying a vast conspiracy. Show how the proposal violates fundamental values that people already hold.

Your chances of framing tone effectively are greatly enhanced if you first use a Level One value, thereby establishing the criterion against which any subsequent argument should be measured. And if your Level One value is embedded in other frame elements (messengers, visuals, metaphors), you stand a good chance of making the cognitive connection with at least one of these elements.

#### CHILDREN’S-ISSUES EXAMPLE

- We are responsible for the world we leave our children. Is this new plan really responsible to them? I think every parent should question that. The legislature has not addressed such critical areas as....
- Parents want their children to have an opportunity to do better than they did. This proposal does little to make that possible. By refusing to address...it closes off opportunities for kids.

These are strong statements. But they do not signal to the listener that partisanship or ideology is the motivations.

#### WELFARE EXAMPLE

I recently received a news release from an organization that wished to raise public awareness about proposed limits on training within the Administration’s welfare proposal – an issue with which I am relatively unfamiliar. This news release purports to convey local private-sector companies’ disapproval of the Bush plan. Good choice of messenger to question whether the proposals will be effective in helping people leave public assistance. So far so good.

As an efficient thinker, I am searching this communication for cues about its meaning, so I can move on to my next email. Here are the first few quotes:

- “Everybody we talk to outside Washington tells us this welfare plan makes no sense.” Translation: Our side doesn’t like it. Question: Who is their side?

### III. Thinking Strategically About Framing Elements of the Frame *Continued*

- “President Bush is giving repeated speeches about the importance of education and training to help people on welfare get the skills they need to succeed. But get beyond the speeches, and you find that the substance of this welfare proposal drastically reduces the number of low-income parents who could enroll in school.” Translation: Bush doesn’t mean what he says; it’s all posturing. Connection: They are anti-Bush. Question: Am I anti-Bush? End of cognitive engagement.

This news release couldn’t resist the temptation to play partisan politics. If it had done so, it might have secured more interest from the reader in learning whether the Administration’s proposals on training are any good or not. Is it just remotely possible that one might a) be supportive of President Bush, and b) think his proposals on TANIF are ill conceived? Given the President’s high approval rating, these advocates need to win over a good portion of that constituency to their way of thinking. Isn’t that one of the reasons they used business spokespersons in the first place?

In fact, many of the quotes in the news release try to move in this more reasonable direction. The statement “The President’s proposal puts the states in an impossible situation” predicts effects without questioning motivation. That’s a good strategy.

But there’s also a game of “gotcha” going on here – and that’s problematic. The communication implies that Bush says he’s for local control, but he really wants to take over, in that he says he is for flexibility, but he really wants to dictate down and control. Again, the direction of the frame is toward motivation.

Proving the plan is ineffective, inconsistent or ill-considered is different than showing the President (or other public official) is disingenuous and inconsistent. It would have taken little editing to move this news release in that direction – avoiding the partisan cues that now bedevil it.

Of course there are times when righteous indignation is both necessary and desirable. Lori Dorfman of the Berkeley Media Studies Group points out that attacking motivation was an important part of tobacco-control advocates’ strategy in addressing the industry. On this issue, by demonstrating that the tobacco industry’s motive was profit, not the public’s health, advocates were able to show that the industry’s behavior profited at the expense of the public interest.

#### HOW TO USE TONE EFFECTIVELY

- Check your communications to make sure you are not inadvertently communicating partisan or political cues to the public.
- Establish a reasonable tone, and set up problem-solving and “American can-do” to engage your audience.
- Use a strong Level One value to provide a universal, not a narrow partisan cue, as the standard by which the issue should be evaluated.
- Use tone to reinforce other frame elements, not to undermine them. For example, if you are calling for more nurturant public policies, don’t sound harsh or extreme.

## IV. A Framing Checklist

Use this checklist as an outline for developing soundbites, brochures or news release for framing errors and omissions. Use it as an evaluation tool to check your communications materials against the research and make sure you have stayed on message and used all the strategies that make sense for each kind of communiqué.

- Based solely on the material you have provided, are you confident that an ordinary reader/viewer could answer the critical question: What is this about? Is it about prevention, safety, freedom, etc.?
- In your attempt to frame for the reader "what is this about," did you begin at Level One, by introducing a value like responsibility, stewardship, or fairness?
- Did you reinforce your Level One message by using words, images, metaphors that support your frames?
- Did you signal early in your message that solutions exist? Do the solutions "fit" the problem as defined?
- Did you emphasize efficacy and prevention in the solution? Did you inspire optimism and give evidence that the situation can be improved?
- Did you establish the cause of the problem, and did you assign responsibility? Reviewing your material, can you tell who created the problem and who should fix it?
- Does your story have sufficient urgency to place it on the public agenda? Have you asked and answered the question: "What will happen if we do nothing"?
- Did you effectively put the problem in context, explaining long-term consequences, trends and opportunities to resolve the problem, so that your story is not episodic?
- Did you stay reasonable in tone, avoiding rhetorical or inflammatory partisan attacks as appropriate?
- Do your visuals make the same points that your words make? Are they organized to support a coherent story?
- Did you use numbers sparingly? Did you first tell what they mean? Did you translate them into social math?
- Did you anticipate and deflect the default frame? Did you avoid arguing with it directly and, instead, substitute a new frame?

## IV. A Framing Checklist

Continued

- Did you use credible and unlikely messengers? Are they likely to be perceived as overly vested in the issue or a sole solution?
- Is your message strategically oriented to the intended audience, i.e. if addressing business leaders, did you frame your issue as appealing to managerial competence and responsibility?
- Did you tell people explicitly how they can help, how they can stay engaged, where they can get information, how they should continue to think about these issues, what they should watch for to monitor progress, whom to hold accountable for what actions? And when you did so, did you address them in their role as citizens or merely as consumers?
- Did you use all elements of the frame to set up your reframe? Context, values, visuals, models and metaphors, numbers/social math, tone?

## V. Some Important Definitions

**Communications:** The FrameWorks Institute views communications as both a theory and a practice that plays a role in shaping public thinking and public life. Communications – earned and paid media, direct mail, brochures, websites, events, grassroots mobilization, face-to-face engagement -- can help or hinder the way people think about social problems and solutions, thus impacting social change.

**Public Opinion** is the measurement and documentation of how the public perceives and thinks about various issues on the public agenda. Analyzing public opinion can contribute to our understanding of how social learning is shaped.

**Framing** refers to the way a story is told – its selective use of particular symbols, metaphors, and messengers, for example – and to the way these cues, in turn, trigger the shared and durable cultural models that people use to make sense of their world. “Frames are *organizing principles* that are socially *shared* and *persistent* over time that work symbolically to meaningfully *structure* the world (emphasis in the original)” (Reese).

**Reframing** seeks to identify alternative frames of interpretation that, although weaker and less common to media, can nevertheless serve the labeling function and foreground different policies or actions. Essentially, reframing changes the lens through which a person can think about the issue, so that different interpretations and outcomes become visible to them.

**Media Effects** experiments use simulated newscasts to isolate and identify the actual impact on specific policies of exposure to one manipulated news story in an otherwise standard evening newscast.

**Public Will** refers to the outcome achieved, whether positive or negative, when issue advocates have motivated the public toward action on a social issue or policy.

**Cognitive Cultural Models** are deeply held understandings that motivate thought and behavior in largely unconscious and automatic ways. They are a kind of prototypical framing that includes several elements packaged together, and that are culture-specific – for example, what it means to be a neighbor, a leader, a parent, etc. The basic elements of a cognitive cultural model include “participants” (people, objects, activities that are associated with that concept or model), a “scenario” (a series of expected, standard events that show the relationships between the participants and are expected to occur in a particular sequence), “presuppositions” (assumptions), “entailments” (conclusions), and “evaluations” (assessments as to whether the model itself, as a whole, is a good thing or a bad thing).

**Episodic Frames** are the predominant frame on TV newscasts and depict public issues in terms of discrete events that involve individuals located at specific places and at specific times.

## V. Some Important Definitions

Continued

**Thematic Frames** place public issues in a broader context by focusing on general conditions or outcomes (e.g., reports on poverty trends in the U.S.).

**Agenda Setting** is the process of placing issues on the policy agenda for public consideration and intervention. Media is instrumental to the perceived salience of a particular social problem. As such, the media sets the public agenda, which in turn sets the policymaker agenda (Iyengar).

**Priming** is the process of consciously triggering a cognitive cultural model and then applying its reasoning to other issues. Priming can also mean “the ability of news programs to affect the criteria by which political leaders are judged...The more prominence an issue has in the national information stream, the greater its weight in political judgments” (Iyengar and Simon, 1994).

**Issue** is “a social problem that has received mass media coverage” (Dearing and Rogers, 3). Issues are set on the public agenda through the “competition among issue proponents to gain the attention of media professionals, the public and policy elites.”

**Parachute Journalism** is the media’s tendency to move rapidly from crisis to crisis, resulting in episodic reporting on many issues.

**Persuasion** refers to the ability to recognize and manipulate attitudes, defined as “a positive or negative feeling toward some individual or object that serves as a predisposition to action” (Rogers, 1994, 366). Persuasion has its origins in supporting private, consumer-oriented responses to individual choices, but has also been adapted to public problems, in the form of social marketing.

**Media Advocacy** is an approach that argues the utilization of the media as an advocacy tool. It conceives of media as a product of issues advocates, and the arena for the contestation of power in American society. This requires issues advocates to be active consumers and developers of media content. This approach is most closely associated with public-health issues.

**Social Marketing** is the practice of applying commercial-marketing techniques to advance social causes. Critical to the definition of social marketing is the notion of influencing individual behavior for the good of that person or general society (Andreason, 1995).

**Strategic Frame Analysis** is a multi-disciplinary, multi-method approach to communications research and practice that pays attention to the public's deeply held worldviews and widely held assumptions. SFA simultaneously incorporates the basic principles of systems thinking to contextual individual-level choices. This approach acknowledges the power of the media and the role of both elite opinion and grassroots activism, while also incorporating thinking and practice on the nature of mass publics.

## V. Some Important Definitions

Continued

Grassroots Mobilization seeks, in the context of communications, to use the media to influence the allocation of public resources in a more equitable manner by empowering community members with a better grasp of how and why media influences outcomes germane to their organizations and communities. The premise is that community groups can have a democratizing influence on the development of solutions to social problems if the media does not marginalize groups.



## VI. FRAMING TECHNIQUES

## COMMUNICATIONS TRAPS TO AVOID

## DON'T THINK ABOUT ELEPHANTS

*Many people believe that the very structure of a conversation must be organized to “start where your audience starts.” Research from the cognitive sciences suggests that this tactic is a trap, and is likely to result in your reinforcing old frames, not helping your audience appreciate new ones. What follows is a simple outline of the interaction between speaker and audience, using a traditional pattern of discourse. It is followed by a critique and a suggested reframing.*

**SPEAKER SAYS:** Today I'm going to talk to you about the animals of Africa.

**AUDIENCE THINKS:** Animals of Africa? What do I know about animals of Africa? Not much. Any cues here for how to think about this?

**SPEAKER SAYS:** But I don't want you to think only of elephants.

**AUDIENCE THINKS:** Oh, yeah. They have elephants in Africa. Lots of elephants. I can now see elephants in Africa in my mind.

**SPEAKER SAYS:** Because it's really not about elephants. They are far less numerous than other species.

**AUDIENCE THINKS:** OK, there are lots of elephants. But also lots of something else.

**SPEAKER SAYS:** The animals that dominate Africa are really giraffes, not elephants.

**AUDIENCE THINKS:** Giraffes, huh? Yeah, I know what a giraffe looks like. Smaller than an elephant. I've had several minutes to think about elephants. And I've now got three elephants in my head (*count them above*), and only one giraffe. It's elephants I see when I close my eyes, not giraffes.

**MORAL OF THE STORY:** *When you give people immediate cues to help them conceptualize and categorize, you are then working uphill to displace that frame. That is especially true when you first reinforce what they already believe or are familiar with, then attempt to contest it.*

**WHAT THE SPEAKER SHOULD HAVE SAID:** I want to talk to you about the animals of Africa, especially the giraffe, the most populous species on the continent. Giraffes abound in all parts of Africa, stretching their giant necks from South Africa to Chad, and from Guinea to Somalia. There are more giraffes per person in Africa than there are cars in California. And while other animals also abound – elephants, lions, tigers, zebras – there are four giraffes for all of these animals combined. Giraffes rule.

**MORAL OF THIS STORY:** You have first conjured the image of the giraffe and made it highly visual before bringing in other animals. You have given people cues about “how many” giraffes there are and have given them two “social math” comparisons to bring it home. While you have acknowledged other animals, as you first set out to do in the original example, you have contextualized these animals so that we can dismiss them. And you have summed up your introduction with a clear statement that this is about giraffes.

## FALLING INTO THE ELEPHANT TRAP IN FRAMING SOCIAL ISSUES:

It's important to recognize standard advocacy practices or habits of speech that fall into the "elephants" category. Here are five examples FrameWorks sees in many advocacy communications. In each case, we explain what's wrong and reframe.

## EXAMPLE #1:

"Nuclear power plants do not emit greenhouse gases, which might make people think they would be a good solution to global warming. In truth, they produce hazardous wastes that are every bit as unfriendly to the environment."

OR "Clean coal isn't really clean; in fact, so-called clean coal plants have yet to prove effective."

**What's Wrong With This Framing?:** You have first stated the very position you wish to displant, then you proceed to attempt to discount it. Why give equal time to your opposition? And why give them first placement? Remember: once the audience has identified the story you are telling them (nuclear plants do not emit greenhouse gases, coal is clean), they stop processing information.

**Reframe:** Nuclear power is a threat to the environment – it's unhealthy and it's unsafe. Environmental problems like global warming require more responsible solutions that clean up our mess, not make more of it.

Coal is dirty. Coal-burning plants are the single biggest source of industrial air pollution. It's time we moved on to a new generation of energy sources that are clean, safe and renewable.

## EXAMPLE #2:

"Usually, people think of violence as fate. It just happens, and you can't do anything about it, so go lock your doors and stay away," Rosenberg said. "Here, they're saying there are patterns in common in various types of violence all around the world, and that we have the goods to prevent it all around the world."

Mark Rosenberg, CDC, "WHO Report Details Global Violence,"  
*The Washington Post*, October 3, 2002, A16

**What's Wrong With This Framing?:** The speaker reminded people of the frame they believe to be true, reinforcing their dominant frame. While he thought he was using it as a "straw man," only to reveal that "it's not what you think it is," that's not the effect. Once you've reminded people of the story they already believe, no subsequent facts or substitute frames are likely to dislodge it. Being fast and frugal cognators, we appreciate that the speaker has reminded us of what we thought all along so we can process this thought and go back to our laundry. End of conversation.

**Reframe:** Violence shares common characteristics all over the globe. Just as we have good qualities in common with people everywhere, we also have problems in common. Fortunately, we can also share the knowledge to prevent violence from erupting.

## EXAMPLE #3:

Even though our state ranks 49th in the country, we still have some wonderful progress to share with you on several key indicators of child well-being.

**What's Wrong With This Framing?:** When you lead with a vivid image like ranking low on a ruler, the emotion evoked is likely to be a sense of hopelessness. You have conveyed "Big Problems" to the listener, and then you come in with "Small Progress."

**Reframe:** We are making some significant progress on a number of children's issues in this state. And that progress should inspire us to tackle other problems, and to bring solutions to scale in every community. We need to think of our state as the Little Engine that Could, and apply some determination to the problems our children face.

## EXAMPLE #4:

You are all familiar with the pictures we see on the evening news of teenage superpredators, kids bringing guns to school, etc. But what you won't see is the fact that youth crime is actually down nationwide and in our state. Your teenager is much safer in school than driving home from school. Teens are much more likely to be the victims of highway accidents than they are to be victims of school shootings.

**What's Wrong With This Framing?:** In order to get the listener's attention, this communication resorts to sensationalism or familiarity. The essential positioning is: I'm going to talk to you about something you see all the time, instead of something arcane. But by playing on the popular notion of teen perpetrators, it has conjured a very powerful model, an "elephant" that won't be easy to dismiss. After setting up the boogeyman, this communication then tries to reassure us. But in doing so, it tells us that our child is at risk for a different problem than the one we thought. Far from being reassuring, this just promotes the notion that all children are at risk for everything and likely produces a response of over-protection. Finally, by ending on the note of "school shootings," this communication trumps its own intended reframe by leaving the listener with exactly the image it set out to refute.

**Reframe:** As parents, our job is to figure out what obstacles and dangers our children are likely to encounter and to help prevent them. We need to pay more attention to highway safety, as it is here that teens are most likely to be at risk and it is here that we can make the biggest difference in personal actions and public policies to prevent harm.

## EXAMPLE #5:

Power plants not only cause global warming, but also smog, acid rain and mercury poisoning.

**What's Wrong With This Framing?:** This is a kind of perversion of the Elephants rule. You imply that the elephant is not enough; chipmunks, monkeys and birds will also be threatened. The way the problem is stated implies that it's not enough that it causes global warming. The "add-ons" undermine the legitimacy of the problem, and trivialize the core issue of global warming. Instead of adding on, integrate single issues under

the category of “environmental problems.” This phrasing elevates all the issues, and gives them equal standing as examples of the larger point.

Reframe: Power plants contribute to many environmental problems including global warming, smog, acid rain and mercury poisoning.

EXAMPLE #6:

I want to talk to you today about child poverty. And how it affects the lives of children in urban and rural areas, in working and welfare families, in single and two-parent families, and in many settings across America. There is no one face of a child in poverty.

What’s Wrong With This Framing?: When you begin a communication by telling the listener what “this is about,” you had better be very careful that the frame you deploy is not one that comes complete with many associated pictures, values and ideas. Child poverty in this communication acts as a prime; that is, it is such a powerful frame – so developed in people’s minds – that it colors the rest of the communication. Despite what this speaker intended about diversifying the definition of child poverty, the image s/he has conjured up is likely to be inner-city, African-American children. Similarly, if we started a communication by saying, “I want to talk to you about teenagers,” FrameWorks research would suggest that we would be likely to prime the subsequent discussion with an image of silly, self-absorbed, lazy, materialistic kids – all part of the “teenager” frame. When you are trying to address an issue that comes with a highly developed frame (welfare, child care, bad parents, etc.), you may be better advised to come at it by avoiding that frame or substituting a frame that opens people up to a different way of thinking about that issue.

Reframe: As Americans, we believe that everyone should get a shot at the American dream – work that pays, owning a home, having enough to eat, raising our children in communities that are safe, getting an education. But many children start the race with a handicap. And that handicap happens early, even before our schools can help get kids on track for achievement. That handicap is poverty, and the research tells us that it is sending too many of our children to school ill-prepared to learn. A hungry child can’t learn, and a child whose brain has not been stimulated early has a harder time learning in school. This handicap can be reversed, but we have to recognize how it affects children and how it denies them the chance of success that is so central to American values of opportunity and prosperity.

SO.....before you put out a news release or frame a soundbite or draft a speech, ask yourself if you have any ELEPHANTS lurking in your communications!

## BRIDGING

*"If they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don't have to worry about the answers."  
Thomas Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow*

Bridging, or answering a question by not answering the question, is a way to segue from a reporter's stated question to the information an interviewee wishes to impart to an audience. Implied in that definition is the fact that reporters often ask questions that advocates do not necessarily wish to "honor" with an answer. The bridge is the way the advocate gets from one side of an argument to another – to the points the advocate wishes to emphasize. Here is a classic example of bridging:

## EXAMPLE:

*Reporter: "Isn't it true that safety is the first thing a mom looks for in a daycare setting?"*

*Spokesperson: "While safety is important, it needs to be balanced with other considerations, like the quality of the environment and the qualifications of the staff. Let me tell you what happens in the mind of a child at the age of 3...."*

According to standard public-relations practice, this is an effective bridge. The spokesperson took the reporter from a naive question to an informed response. But, drawing on what we now know about how people process information, this bridging technique is NOT effective.

The problem with bridging, as it is often practiced, is that it accepts the frame of the question — a safety frame, in this example — and often repeats it, before reframing.

What does this mean? The question itself prompts a certain idea or cluster of connections in the mind of the viewer/listener. If the spokesperson repeats the frame as part of the bridging technique, their score is 0 for 2 before they've even started. If you've just told the viewers/listeners twice that "this is about safety," it's an uphill battle to get them to realize that "it's not really about safety at all, it's about education." Far from contradicting or dismissing the reporter's frame, we've accepted it and confirmed it, adding to the audience's initial orientation to the subject. An efficient thinker will simply use those cues to erect the frame of interpretation that corresponds, and dismiss most of what comes afterward. There are ways around this problem.

Going back to our original example of the daycare question, the enlightened bridger should have answered:

**BETTER EXAMPLE:**

*"There are several considerations for parents seeking early childhood education...."*

The answer does not repeat the negative frame, seems responsive to the question, and allows the spokesperson to go in the intended direction. Here are some simple techniques for effective bridging.

**RULE #1: NEVER REPEAT A NEGATIVE FRAME.**

Too often the reporter tosses you a question that repeats a stereotype, or is sensationalist or uninformed. Use an innocuous phrase or throw-away line to bridge away from the negative frame...."That's a great question (pause). You've hit an important point. Here's what I think about early childhood education..."

As reporters told FrameWorks representatives, "Don't expect us to do your reframing for you. It's daycare as far as we're concerned. If you want to call it something else, it will have to come out of the mouths of advocates."

Alternatively, **restate the question to set up a different frame.** "The question you raise is really about how we do a better job in supporting very young children and their working parents. And the answer is that we have to..."

Another way to steer the interview with a bridge is to **dismiss the old frame and immediately substitute a new one.** That way you signal to the reporter that you are offering something new, a fresh angle on an old story, something that will win approval from their editors or producers.

**EXAMPLE**

*Reporter: "How many children in this state are at risk for poor daycare?"*

*Spokesperson: "Safety has gotten a lot of attention, but the biggest threat to our children hasn't received the attention it deserves. (PAUSE) The big story about early childhood development is that our schools haven't caught up with our science. We now know that there's a lot of learning going on very early in children. Not just information, but prosocial and antisocial behavior, interpersonal and moral development, and a sense of responsibility for oneself and others. The early foundations for all these important aspects of child development happen earlier than we even suspected a decade ago. Most parents and policymakers don't yet understand that everything starts in those early years."*

# VI. FRAMING TECHNIQUES

Continued

## RULE #2: KNOW HOW YOUR INTERVIEW WILL BE USED.

Always know the rules of the game you are playing. Is this a live or taped interview? Is there ample time to edit, or is the interview scheduled for tonight's evening news? If it's taped and you will be edited, you can reasonably assume that, if you give a great soundbite, the anchor will re-record or edit around you. So, PAUSE between your bridge and your declarative statement, so they can salvage the latter without catching several syllables.

## EXAMPLE:

The way it happened (live):

*Reporter: "What's all the fuss about zero to three-year-old kids? You and I played with dirt and spoons, and we grew up OK. Isn't this just a big over-reaction by yuppie parents who are hurrying their children into overachievement?"*

*Spokesperson: "It's interesting you ask that.....I believe we've always needed better early childhood education. But now we need it more than ever. Our economy has changed. It absolutely requires better-educated workers. And because our economy makes it harder for one parent to stay at home with a child, we need to make sure that a child's intellectual, emotional and moral learning all begin early on if we are to prepare them for the future."*

The way it was produced (canned):

*Evening News: "Sally Janes, the head of Kids Count, Turtle Island, says the economy is driving parents and our society toward better daycare."*

*Spokesperson: "I believe we've always needed better early childhood education. But now we need it more than ever. Our economy has changed. It absolutely requires better-educated workers. And, because our economy makes it harder for one parent to stay at home with a child, we need to make sure that a child's intellectual, emotional and moral learning all begin early on if we are to prepare them for the future."*

Note that, had the spokesperson not rambled that last sentence out conditional clause first, s/he would likely have had the more societal part of the message cut. It might have ended up: "Our economy makes it harder for one parent to stay at home with a child." End of quote. So sometimes you don't want to pause but rather to weave a clause inextricably into your answer.

Thinking carefully about what you want to pack into your soundbite is a very important bit of preparation. But whether you are talking to print or broadcast reporters, some of the rules are the same:



## RULE #3: FRAME THE DATA, OR DON'T FIGHT NARRATIVE WITH NUMBERS.

Too often, advocates succumb to what linguist Deborah Tannen calls “the argument culture” — they try to fight fire with fire. So when a reporter asserts a perspective, the spokesperson resorts to “disproving” it with data. A quick rule of thumb in framing: The narrative is more powerful than the numbers, the meaning more memorable than the mean.

In focus groups conducted over two years on children’s issues in which statistics about various social problems were presented to participants, we have only rarely heard an issue discussed by real people with reference to the numbers.

The fact is that many Americans find it hard to digest data and interpret it; mathematical literacy is a major hurdle. But, that aside, the psyche is often resistant to data that erode a comfortable view of the world. Quite often, the numbers are reinterpreted to substantiate an entirely different conclusion. From the social-science roots of framing research we learn this maxim: If the facts don’t fit the frame, the facts get rejected not the frame.

Yet, the facts are what produced the media opportunity in the first place. The release of new data is a reliable news hook. So the job of the good spokesperson is to bridge from the trend to the interpretation. Don’t rebut, trump!

Even mathematicians recognize this. John Allen Paulos writes, “People...consider numbers as coming from a different realm than narratives and not as distillations, complements or summaries of them” (*Once Upon A Number*, Basic Books, 1998). You haven’t done your job until you tell what the number means.

“The process of converting data into easily understandable information that communicates its relevance to an issue has been termed ‘social math’,” writes the Advocacy Institute (*Blowing Away the Smoke: A Series of Advanced Media Advocacy Advisories for Tobacco Control Advocates*, 1998). As it relates to bridging, the trick is to have an interpretation, a “story” ready to translate the number thrown at you into a more powerful meaning. This does not mean you should drop all numbers, but rather that you should use them sparingly and always link them to meaning.

## EXAMPLE:

*Reporter: “Isn’t it true that much adult violence could be prevented with better early child education? Is early education our best crime prevention?”*

*Here we offer an answer from conservative pollster Dave Sackett, who effectively rebuts this framing first by questioning it, then by negating it, and finally by substituting his own frame:*

*Spokesperson: “How the hell does nursery school prevent some kids sticking up my liquor store with a gun? Crime prevention isn’t nursery school. It’s having a bigger gun than the guy who’s coming to stick it to me. That’s crime prevention.”*

# VI. FRAMING TECHNIQUES

Continued

## RULE #4: USE METAPHORS TO BRIDGE.

As cognitive linguist George Lakoff has demonstrated in his research (see *Moral Politics*, University of Chicago Press, 1996), "People reason metaphorically." That is to say that people make connections between one set of things and another. They use what is familiar (my family, my neighbors) to allow them to understand what is foreign or complex (my nation, other nations). Moreover, these metaphorical patterns are not "merely" colorful expressions; they are embedded in people's conceptual systems and they are largely uniform across a population. They comprise a shared culture. And they direct action; all the parts of the metaphor come with the analogy. For example, if foreign countries are neighbors, they don't want us to meddle; we should only show up when they need us and then leave.

The good news is that we often hold several conflicting views or potential ways of seeing an issue, depending upon the prism or "frame" through which we view it. So, if foreign countries are partners in a world community, then we have common interests and need to collaborate regularly. The challenge for the spokesperson is to bridge from a negative frame to one that sets up the kind of reasoning that favors positive social policies.

Applied to bridging, this means the effective spokesperson always is ready with a powerful metaphor that can redirect reasoning.

## EXAMPLE:

*Reporter: "Isn't this emphasis on education for two- and three-year olds misplaced? Are we going to put up flash cards in their cribs? How can an infant benefit from Beethoven?"*

*Spokesperson: "There's an old saying that many parents know, 'As the twig is bent, so grows the tree.' We've always known instinctively that the early years were important – we just didn't know exactly how they helped shape our children's minds. Now we know that the whole foundation for learning is set in those early years. Children learn right from wrong very early, they learn the social relationships that will determine how they get along as citizens and as workers. The moral and social foundations of the child are the moral and social foundations of the society as a whole."*

Notice how the spokesperson did not waste time addressing the red herrings directly. S/he offered substitute metaphors that redirected attention to familiar, positive images: a cultivation metaphor, a brain-science frame, a cornerstone of society model, and an "investment in the future" message.

## RULE #5: CONTEXTUALIZE

If they give you a portrait, bridge to a landscape. If they give you an episode, bridge to the theme of the whole series.

Framing research shows that a human-interest story alone, especially the more vivid and detailed it is, will not lead people to conclude that a policy solution is required for an entire population. More than likely, the case study or example will be interpreted as tragic or regrettable and worthy of pity or charity but without extension; and often, the case is simply an exception, or the exception that proves the rule (the good parent who finds safe, affordable daycare and thereby demonstrates that more parents could do so if they tried harder). So the effective bridge connects the isolated case to trend data, to social situations that caused the problem, and to the policy solutions that are required.

## EXAMPLE:

*Reporter: "Last week this station ran a horrific story about a toddler trapped in a closet for more than three hours while no one at this daycare center noticed. How can parents tell if a daycare center is safe for their child?"*

*Spokesperson: "Until we fix the early education system by making sure that all environments for children are stimulating, well supervised, with skilled trained professionals, there will be a lot more horror stories. And a lot more stories that never get told of children who are not challenged, and who are not learning to learn. Both are tragedies, and wasteful of our most precious resources, our future. A good daycare center is one where the teachers have been well trained in early child development, where the ratio of educators to children is no more than X to Y, where the environment is both safe and nurturing, where moms and dads are welcome, and families can afford to bring their children."*

RULE # 6: ALWAYS KNOW WHO ELSE HAS BEEN INTERVIEWED  
OR IS LIKELY TO BE INTERVIEWED

Often reporters will have talked to or will talk to someone who expresses another frame or views that are antithetical to your position. Consider this when creating your messages.

EXAMPLE:

*Reporter: "Last week this station ran a horrific story about a toddler trapped in a closet for more than three hours while no one at this daycare center noticed. How can parents tell if a daycare center is safe for their child?"*

*Spokesperson: "Until we fix the early education system by making sure that all environments for children are stimulating, well-supervised, with skilled trained professionals, there will be a lot more horror stories. And a lot more stories that never get told of children who are not challenged, and who are not learning to learn. Both are tragedies, and wasteful of our most precious resources, our future. A good daycare center is one where the teachers have been well trained in early child development, where the ratio of educators to children is no more than X to Y, where the environment is both safe and nurturing, where moms and dads are welcome, and families can afford to bring their children."*

*Reporter's Follow-Up: The for-profit daycare association president, Martha Vincent says that it is up to each parent to check out a daycare.*

*Vincent: Remember that you get what you pay for. Each parent should try to find the best center and stay on top of the way the place is managed. That daycare center was just one that was poorly run. Most of our centers are up to standards required by the state.*

A better response that anticipated this hostility toward greater regulations might have been:

*Spokesperson: "This is not a story of one daycare center but a story about how we all need to ask the state for better day care centers for our most precious resources. Until we fix the early education system by making sure that all environments for children are stimulating and well-supervised, with skilled, trained professionals, there will be a lot more horror stories.*

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