

**A Window on the Storm:  
How TV Global News Promotes  
A Cognitive “Refuge Stance”**

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"Everybody talks about the weather, but nobody does anything about it."

– Mark Twain

### **Introduction**

This memo starts from the assumption shared across many professional fields and academic disciplines, that television has a powerful capacity to shape public understandings of the world. As part of the FrameWorks research for the Global Interdependence Initiative, the Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA) conducted a statistical analysis of the contents of over a thousand international stories on local, network and cable news programs. Their conclusions about the global picture painted in television news are sobering – in their words, “little of [the global news coverage on TV] could reasonably be expected to increase either the comprehension ordinary citizens have of global issues, or their representation in the public debate over America’s role in the wider world” (Lichter et al., 2000, p. 40).

In the discussion that follows, we comment on the same material from a slightly different perspective. Our conclusions, based on principles of cognitive science, concern broad generalizations about how foreign events are framed in the news, and more importantly, about the likely effects of this framing on viewers’ thinking about international topics.

### **Major Finding**

Looking at the news segments, and at CMPA’s analysis of them, from our perspective, we arrive at the following conclusion:

*By presenting most global events as though they were acts of nature, American TV news encourages viewers to adopt a passive “Refuge Stance” towards the rest of the world.*

In other words, because of the types of information which are presented, and how that information is framed, international TV news is likely to evoke a state of mind in which people observe global events from a safe refuge, spectating rather than participating actively in them. In the rest of the memo, we explain this finding and its consequences.

### **The “Ruthless Competition Frame” vs. the “Chaos Frame”**

Previous studies conducted by the FrameWorks team – including in-depth interviews with the public and with opinion leaders, reviews of earlier, published surveys, and analysis of print media coverage – have established that American public discourse about global affairs is characterized by some recurring perspectives. Here is how those perspectives were summarized in a questionnaire created by FrameWorks (see Bostrom 2000 “Primed and Suspect: How the Public Responds to Different Frames On Global Issues”):

The world is a dangerous place, which no country can control. It is also increasingly competitive. Leaders rise and fall; the country that is your friend one year is your competitor the next. Poverty, famine, and internal strife devastate some countries, while others prosper. There is little that any country can do to intervene, and the efforts of individuals are overwhelmed by the world’s problems. While we try to offer some comfort to the victims of disasters, the main role for the United States in world affairs is to protect Americans and American interests at home and abroad.

This statement incorporates two broad frames for thinking about global affairs:

- The “Ruthless Competition Frame”: Countries are like persons; countries other than the U.S. are often like selfish and unknowable persons; international relations are like ruthlessly competitive interpersonal relationships.
- The “Chaos Frame”: Events in the rest of the world are typically unpredictable and uncontrollable, and there is not much point in trying to change or understand them.

While personification of other countries is common in expert discourse (see Aubrun & Grady, 2000; Grady & Aubrun, 1999) and present, though in different ways, in lay understandings (see Aubrun & Grady, 1999), the Ruthless Competition Frame is largely absent from broadcast news. TV coverage reflects (while at the same time reinforcing) the interests and priorities of average American viewers, who have little awareness of other countries as actors. In short, television news typically presents global events in terms of what we term the Chaos Frame, with specific consequences.

### **Acts of Nature and the Refuge Stance**

Human beings are faced with different categories of events – some that we can influence and those, like acts of nature, that we can only watch and make the best of. The most salient examples of acts of nature in day-to-day life are weather events.

The natural response to acts of nature is a passive attitude, in which we focus on observable events (e.g. weather conditions themselves) rather than causation– e.g., the chance that we can cause the weather to change. For very good reasons, we are reactive rather than proactive with respect to acts of nature. Whether benign (a sunny day), annoying (a rainy day), or catastrophic (an earthquake or other natural disaster), natural events are understood as occurring outside our own “sphere of influence.”

In other words, with respect to acts of nature we are spectators rather than actors. Our primary concerns are to observe and to protect ourselves. In this memo, we refer to the normal cognitive response to acts of nature as the “Refuge Stance.” In the Refuge Stance, we watch events through a real or imagined window, from the safety of a protective shelter like a home, occasionally envisioning outings to deal with the consequences of these events (e.g. storm damage).

### **How TV News Promotes the “Refuge Stance”**

By its nature, TV tends to promote the Refuge Stance: It allows viewers to witness events with which they have no immediate causal relationship – on the physical level, they can neither affect what is happening on TV nor be affected by it – from the safety of their homes. TV is like a window not only in that it gives us a view of the world, but also that it seems to be a protective screen standing between that world and us.

### **Framing Human Actions as Acts of Nature and Vice Versa**

This effect is reinforced and heightened when TV frames events as though they were the kinds of potentially threatening events over which we can have no control – such as acts of nature. Changes in the economy and the stock market are often treated as metaphorical weather-like phenomena; they are vaguely cyclical, but largely unpredictable and uncontrollable. Terms like *business cycle* and *prevailing economic conditions* reflect this way of thinking. On local news shows, crime too is often treated as weather-like. It is presented as an aspect of our surroundings which is endemic, chronic, and difficult for an individual to predict or have an impact on. Instead, viewers are primed to simply check the crime report (akin to the weather report) and deal with the consequences as best they can. This way of framing human actions is not uncommon in other contexts; Attila the Hun, in one famous example, spoke of himself as a devastating force of nature, rendering the land infertile as he passed over it.

Conversely, weather and other acts of nature are often personified – a *raging* storm takes its *vengeance* on the coastline. (Of course, this is a very common framing in traditional cultures, where weather can also be susceptible to persuasion, i.e. propitiation).

In short, human actions can be metaphorically framed as acts of nature and acts of nature can be metaphorically framed as human actions. Since these framing choices naturally lead to distinct cognitive

stances – and the crucial point here is that they are choices – the consequences are significant. In the next section we explore the ways in which global events are treated as acts of nature in TV news.

### **How Global News Frames World Events as Acts of Nature**

- *World events are chronic "background noise."*

Broadcast coverage of global news emphasizes the repetitive, unavoidable, and often cyclical nature of events. Droughts, wars, and peace talks recur endlessly, in a process of apparently spontaneous generation. To the degree that they are taken to be acts of nature, attempts to control their occurrence are likely to be seen as Quixotic.

- *World events are lacking in agency.*

CMPA's research demonstrates that in most world news stories, no agency is attributed to a reported event. The U.S. in particular is almost never an agent. Acts of nature are the prototype of events that are significant but have no identifiable cause.

CMPA's finding that when events are given causes, these are likely to be acts of nature or human error, strongly confirms the idea that world events are portrayed as acts of nature.

- *Many world event stories directly concern acts of nature.*

The CMPA study found that one of the prototypical topics of global news stories is the natural disaster. It is reasonable to expect that this directly reinforces the association between world events and acts of nature.

### **An Example: Wars and Conflicts Portrayed as Acts of Nature**

Wars and conflicts are usually understood by policymakers as prototypically human acts, "extensions of policy" according to Clausewitz's famous dictum; i.e., as a struggle between actors. Framed in this way, agency and motivation are a critical part of the phenomenon.

In stark contrast, TV news portrays wars and conflicts as something more akin to crime. Civilian victims – dispossessed refugees, often children – are prominently featured (see Moeller, 1999a and 1999b), and the issues often call to mind a crime frame: Political leaders are "war *criminals*;" the United States is "the world's *policeman*," etc.

This is significant because violent crime itself is often understood as though it were an act of nature. Crimes, which are often *senseless*, have an unpredictable randomness. Understanding the causes of crime does not guarantee one's safety. We are used to dealing with the consequences of crime far more than with its causes: People's immediate response to crime is often to get out of its way and later to pick up the pieces, rather than to "get involved."

### **Some Consequences of Framing World Events As Acts of Nature**

- *Understanding the causes of acts of nature does not automatically lead to an active stance.*

One entailment of the Act of Nature frame is that understanding does not lead to control. Better analysis and reporting can help us predict volcano eruptions, hurricanes, and cloudy days, but can't normally help us head them off. Even a better understanding of climate patterns does not necessarily bridge the separation between the planes of human agency and acts of nature.

Similarly, there is little reason to believe that simply adding explanatory context to world news stories will necessarily lead to a shift from the spectator stance.

- *Watching (bad) weather from inside a house makes us feel snug.*

One implication of the Refuge Stance, especially in the American cultural context, is tendency to "batten down the hatches." This stance is associated with being located in the privacy of a family-centered shelter (the home), rather than with being in a public setting where collaboration with

neighbors or partners is likely to occur. In effect, this stance reinforces the American tendency toward individualism.

Given the natural tendency of the public to map their lived social world onto the world of international relations, the Refuge Stance is compatible with the idea of Fortress America writ small, and experienced as the safety of one's own home.

- *Weather events are of interest only briefly.*

The Act of Nature stance is all about what is happening, what has just happened, or what is about to happen. People have a short memory for weather unless it is quite extreme. By contrast, people (and other social species) have a long and detailed memory about the previous actions of other individuals in their sphere. Current decisions are made in the context of this mental record.

We do not think this way about nature or the weather, and global news coverage on television does not encourage to think this way about international affairs, but rather to react only to the current crisis.

### **The Obvious Alternative: Framing for Agency**

The antithesis of the Act of Nature frame would be one that primes viewers to perceive agency in global events, and especially, to feel as though they themselves have agency with respect to those events. When a person participates in a situation involving other individuals, a key mental “module” is activated (termed the “other minds module” in some cognitive psychology research). This mode of thinking involves a focus on motives, choices, strategies, and sometimes competition. We try to understand what’s going on in another actor’s mind; what led to the act he or she just committed; what that other person might do next; etc. Generally speaking, this mode also correlates with heightened arousal and concentration. In short, it is the opposite of the Refuge Stance. We could refer to it as the “Player Stance.”

Foreign affairs professionals naturally operate from this stance (see Aubrun & Grady, 2000). They think of global events in terms of choices and consequences, and are aware of the distinct participants who shape these events. They are actively engaged, rather than passive and detached. Academics and other experts also tend to have much more of a sense of agency in world affairs than the average viewer of TV news.

Note that despite the obvious advantages of this stance over the Refuge Stance, it does not represent an ideal in and of itself. Specifically, it has no moral content – a foreign affairs practitioner with a clear sense of being involved in an active struggle with other individuals may just as easily act according to Machiavellian rather than altruistic principles.

The positive news is that if you do succeed in promoting a sense of agency in the American public, they are predisposed to act cooperatively, rather than according to pure self-interest. When Americans are confronted with having to think about their role in the world – a question they usually don’t consider – they express their desire to act with decency, humility and fairness on the world stage (see, e.g., Kull & Destler, 1999; Bostrom, 1999). This means that if news stories simply placed a heavier emphasis on agency, and in particular American agency in world events, the consequences for public discourse should be right in line with the goals of the Global Interdependence Initiative.

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