

A FRAMER READS THE NEWS

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The last week's news has been so rich in framing examples pertinent to GII's interests that I thought I would take the opportunity to launch this occasional column on the List-serv. As we've said in our workshops for GII, a lot can be learned by deconstructing your colleagues' op/eds and soundbites, as well as those of the opposition. When you compare them to the Message Points and Framing Checklist provided in "Communicating Global Interdependence," you begin to see where they fall short or how they could have been rewritten to be even more effective. This column will take up a newspaper or two over the course of the year and offer observations on how global issues are being framed in the news, with what probable consequences for public understanding of and support for international engagement.

The Great Reframer Strikes (Out) Again

Sunday's Washington Post (June 24, 2001) offers an interesting op/ed by Bill Clinton entitled, "We Can Win the War on AIDS." Hardly a new frame overall, but within the article are a number of examples of framing techniques, both poorly and ingeniously exercised.

The article begins with a stereotype that the author wishes us to see in a new way (the dangerous but ubiquitous "turn an idea on its head" technique). The stereotype is that of an African child dying of AIDS; the reframe is that the child was an activist, a courageous and charismatic voice, not a 'passive and helpless victim,' as is inferred in so many news stories (see Susan Moeller's research in the Toolkit). What is the problem with this construct? First, the image of an African child dying of AIDS is one we know well – it comes complete with strong visual imagery that is likely to sadden us and to remind us that, in this war, it is the disease that is winning, not the individuals. What is our likely response to this image? Empowerment? Outrage? A willingness to step up to the battle? Or hopelessness, and charity to relieve suffering?

Clinton assumes his reframe is active as he moves on in the essay: "Nkomi and his peers have given me hope that we can prevail against this terrible scourge." Has hope been established? Nkomi died. There is an emotional and intellectual disconnect between the set-up or "prime" and the rest of the op/ed. If you asked right now "what is this about?," the likely answer would be "a child has died in the war against AIDS." Even if you adopted Clinton's intended frame, "a child of courage has fallen victim," it does not mean that this article is about "hope."

The construction of this article is instructive in a number of respects. Clinton makes the mistake that many academic writers make in saving his best frame for the end. Here he quotes Nkomi as saying, "We are all human beings. We are the same." And Clinton then states that we must win the war on AIDS because "our humanity requires it." In this last paragraph, we have both an appeal to American ingenuity ("Of course we can.") and a moral norms frame, that invites us in to the discussion on the basis of empathy and identification with the other, not on the basis of sympathy for victims. How much stronger Clinton's appeal would have been if he had put this paragraph at the top, bolstered it with more evidence of our interdependence, and then moved on to tell us how to fight the battle that threatens us all as human beings!

The third paragraph is (predictably) devoted to a litany of numbers, as if we needed evidence of the size and scope of the scourge: "Over the past two decades, 58 million people worldwide have been infected with HIV, and 22 million have died of AIDS. Today, 36 million people are HIV-positive, over two-thirds of whom live in Africa...By 2005, an estimated 100 million people will be infected." Does this sound like a war we can win? What is the probable effect on the average American of these numbers? A sense of urgency and agency or hopelessness and sympathy? Moreover, does the writer tell us what to think of these numbers? How about a little social math and some priming to help us understand that this battle is winnable? How about invoking our sense of a fight worth fighting, by even using a David and Goliath reference to help us understand Nkomi's courage against the odds?

The fourth paragraph (also predictably) tells us that the real reason we should fight the good fight is because it's in our economic self-interest to do so. If we don't take up Nkomi's cause, "the health of our economy" will suffer.

Additionally, AIDS “decimates the ranks of civic, entrepreneurial and military leadership” and is a “security threat.” Having raised the “self-interest frame,” is this new information likely to make us want to engage in the struggle or protect ourselves from it?

We are six paragraphs into this article (if, indeed, we’ve continued to read on) before Clinton gives us a single reason to hope or struggle: “Around the world, local organizations have proven that with strong leadership, popular commitment and proportionate resources, they can slow or even reverse the rate of new infection and provide life-prolonging treatment for the sick. Uganda, once the center of Africa’s AIDS epidemic, has seen its infection rate drop by more than half...” This is the ammunition and vision we needed to support the “hope,” “American ingenuity,” and “we can win” messages upon which the entire article relies. Would that this message had occurred higher in the article! Would that the examples had been both more vibrantly described and connected to frames of “partnership,” and “teamwork,” to counter the (don’t think about elephants!) inevitable question of why this assistance is the U.S.’s unique responsibility! How vulnerable this offhanded information leaves us to George Bush’s critique that there is little we can or should do because the appropriate work of people within nations is to undertake “nation-building”!

Indeed, the paragraph that follows (predictably) makes the pitch for funds to support the U.S. effort, and exhorts us to do so because “to shirk this responsibility is to abdicate America’s timeless role as a beacon of hope and promise.” How much more effective would this message have been if we had not been, once again, alone on the world stage? Clinton’s op/ed is likely to be read by the public as “about” America’s relationship/obligation to Africa, the two main protagonists in this story. And, as the research would suggest, Americans are not unwilling to pitch in, as long as others are also doing their share. The fact that the U.N. is mentioned hardly helps this equation. We need to see other countries taking part and “fighting” alongside us.

All in all, this op/ed reads like a formulaic presentation of predictable components, with little strategic assessment of what people are likely to take away from the story. It’s not that the components are “bad,” so much as that they are unrealized and disconnected, making this a relatively ineffective call to action.

Compare the take-away from this long article with Clinton’s soundbite just before he left office (Chicago, January 9, 2001, as reported in *The Washington Post*, Wednesday, January 10, 2001, A9):

“I believe that one of the fundamental facts of the modern world is that we are growing more and more interdependent within our communities, our nation and beyond our borders. I believe that, therefore, successful social work, including economics, is becoming more and more like winning the national basketball championship. It’s a team sport.”

Proving once again, that the power of the idea is not always proportional to the column inches accorded it. Clinton on his feet has always been far better than the prepared text. So who do you think *really* wrote that op/ed?

Promising Reframe Noted

Donald M. Berwick’s op/ed “We All Have AIDS” (*Washington Post*, Tuesday, June 26, 2001) offers a promising reframe, but it’s not the one he chose to develop. The idea that we all have AIDS is one that we inherently reject since it flies in the face of reason and self-protection. However, buried in this essay is a more promising frame: “The earth has AIDS.” Why is this promising? Because it says that the planet is sick, therefore we cannot distance ourselves from this statement. The planet – our home – is threatened by disease, and we are, therefore, automatically at risk. This is the “global environment” frame. Had Berwick developed this as the threat to our environments, much as Clinton began to in the op/ed above (restating “decimates the ranks of civic, entrepreneurial and military leadership” so that we can see the impact of the destruction of peoples and nations on the planet), this op/ed could have been a very powerful statement about our commonality in confronting AIDS.

The Dog Ate the Rest of My Social Math Homework

Richard Morin and Claudia Deane report in their column “The Ideas Industry” (*Washington Post*, Tuesday, June 26, 2001 A15) a new calculation from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities: “For every individual in the United

States, our country contributed an average of \$33 a year in development aid to poor countries in 1998-1999. This was the third-lowest level of per capital contributions among the 22 countries examined....Denmark, for example, contributed \$326 per person.” Ready for prime time? Almost, but not quite. The first statistic is likely to be met with confusion unless contextualized. What does \$33 mean – is it a lot? a little? what? In order for the number to mean anything, it needs to be preceded by an idea, framed if you will for public consumption. *A FrameWorks award to the best submission for completing this sentence, i.e., “Each person in the United States contributes less to the world than they do to.....”*

Second, the Denmark example could have benefitted by forcing the frame into the equation, i.e. “Our other partners in other countries are making the effort, and doing their share. They know we’re all in this together, and that these are kroner and pesos well spent on prevention.....But in recent years, politics has kept the U.S. from holding up its end of the partnership.” Properly contextualized, this social math equation is just what was needed in Clinton’s op/ed above.

How is interdependence being framed in your daily newspaper? Inquiring minds want to know...