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"Her Daughter Was One of Them": How Personal Narratives Attach to Public Issues in Mississippi News Coverage

A FrameWorks Research Report

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Introduction

Even as the media landscape undergoes radical transformation, mass media sources continue to have tremendous influence on how the public perceives social issues, social groups, and geographical regions. A recent study by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism found that most of what the public learns about what is going on in the world, including social issues and public policy, is still overwhelmingly driven by traditional media, particularly newspapers. Despite the fact newspapers are offering less real news content, the stories they publish continue to set the narrative agenda for most other media outlets.[i]

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation has supported this media content analysis to discern how newspapers in Mississippi are framing and conveying information about an array of pressing social issues. Research on media content is a major component of Strategic Frame Analysis™, FrameWorks Institute's theoretical and methodological approach to communications research, which is designed to help scholars, advocates and policymakers map and make sense of the barrage of information, ideas and narratives— i.e., "public discourses"—to which people are exposed on any given issue. Our research identifies the frames that are embedded in media's messages, outlines the broad contours of coverage, and illustrates how that coverage contributes to setting the public agenda on an issue during a particular time period. This process involves tracking the types and number of stories devoted to particular issues, the sources of information and quotes that are used, suggested causes of problems, types of reforms or solutions being proposed, and so forth. For a variety of theoretical and practical reasons, we are particularly interested in whether an issue is framed around private, individual behaviors and solutions or public, systemic explanations and actions. By identifying patterns in coverage, media analyses ultimately help enhance our understanding of why individuals develop certain predictable patterns for interpreting information. This foundational understanding feeds into FrameWorks' subsequent development of reframes that advocates can use to evoke more robust public conversations.

The report that follows examines 12 months of newspaper reporting in Mississippi, from January 2009 through January 2010, on five general subject areas: race and racism, education, health and health care, child development, and children's health and well-being. Our use of Strategic Frame Analysis to identify patterns in media coverage helps us to demonstrate how individuals in Mississippi develop certain predictable patterns for interpreting information. A major goal has been to discern whether Mississippians are likely to walk away from newspaper coverage with an enhanced or constrained understanding of the issues that face the state and their potential for solution. We want to know if readers are being offered sufficient context to appreciate the systemic underpinnings of problems confronting the state's residents, and whether newspaper coverage is prompting them to see the value of dialogue, community partnerships, and public policy solutions that demand public investment. In the end, this media content analysis is a significant part of a process that will allow FrameWorks to develop reframes, with the ultimate goal of advancing more constructive public conversations and community-based and public policy solutions for problems facing Mississippi residents.

Summary of Findings

In this analysis we reviewed five key areas of coverage in Mississippi including race and racism, education, early child development, health and health care and, finally, children's health and well-being. There were several themes that cut across all of the issue areas included in the analysis.

The Intractability Theme. The first theme that emerged was the continuous focus on Mississippi as coming in "dead last" among many social indicators. It was widely acknowledged in Mississippi-based newspapers that the state ranked at the bottom of most lists—often dead last—on nearly every social, educational, health, and economic measure, from median income to educational attainment levels to obesity and teen pregnancy prevention. It was not uncommon for newspapers, especially on opinion pages, to observe that a commitment to keeping taxes and government spending low, and a popular desire for smaller government and less government involvement in residents' lives, had led the governor to propose cuts, not funding, for programs designed to meet vital needs, including schools, pre-kindergarten programs, and health care. The likely impact of so much "dead last" coverage was to induce or reinforce a sense of failure, resignation, and hopelessness on the part of readers.

Disparities as a Force of Nature Theme. Second, the coverage tended to naturalize disparities between groups in issues like education, employment, health outcomes throughout the life course and access to health care. While income inequality and a shortage of social services were reported to be pervasive problems, it was not always clear which residents of the state were most affected. In most of the issue areas covered in this analysis, the majority of the coverage focused on regional disparities within the state. Often overlooked was the fact that disparities in the Delta counties have had a significant impact on the state's rankings, and that race has been a major determinant of a spectrum of quality of life measurements. Also unclear in most reporting were explanations about how or why disparities occur. When specificity is lacking, readers are unlikely to understand where interventions might be beneficial, where resources are needed most, or how the conditions of those who are underserved affect Mississippi's overall economy and therefore the state's population as a whole.

The Individualism vs. Interdependence Theme. In all of the areas covered, solutions were often limited to changing individual behavior. While some of the coverage, especially about economic development and jobs, made an explicit link between the level of education attained by Mississippians and a host of problems plaguing the state, solutions were most often framed in ways that made them appear to positively affect only one specific demographic or a particular region of the state, rather than the entire population. A consequence of this emphasis was that the broader public may, in the end, fail to see how helping "those people" (whichever racial, ethnic, or economic group they did not associate themselves with) was of any benefit to them.

There were also notable findings from each sub-issue area:

Racism Is a Personal Expression to be Addressed through Dialogue. For the most part, racism was addressed in terms of individual behaviors and interpersonal dynamics, i.e., racial bigotry or prejudice. Less often was it discussed as something that is embedded in social structures and which results in disparities between social groups. When race was discussed historically, it was usually in terms of an individual's life history and tended to be confined to the Civil Rights Era and its aftermath. The deeper historical origins of racism were rarely part of the story told. When dialogue was identified as an important element in solving problems, it was more likely to be around race than any other subject. In promoting the idea that problems of race can be solved through dialogue and other adjustments in personal interactions, a host of difficult and potentially costly systemic changes fall out of the public conversation. Rarely, if ever, was dialogue identified as a solution to problems plaguing the educational system or the delivery of health care, although it could play a role in shifting how people think about those issues, just as it has that potential through conversations about race.

Education System in Mississippi Is in Constant Crisis. The media coverage related to education in Mississippi was dominated by stories about budget crises. This kind of coverage came at the expense of articles focusing on other problems endemic to the education system in Mississippi, such as racial segregation and inequality among schools in the state. Furthermore, the coverage focused almost exclusively on the seemingly insurmountable problems faced by the state's educational system.

Early Determinants Are Invisible. Early child development and children's well-being were topics that received the least attention of all of the issues examined, a finding that is in line with other FrameWorks studies.[ii] This was the case even though Mississippi houses centers of early child development studies, and there are some articulate experts in the field based there. The relatively scant coverage that did exist made connections between early child development and opportunities throughout a person's life. Even within a small sample, there was only one op-ed written, suggesting an important opportunity for early childhood advocates to pursue.

Health Individualism Explains Disparities. The coverage on health and health care showed promising trends, but also more unproductive tendencies. In reporting disparities in health care access, Mississippi reporters were able to clearly convey systemic causes, such as the lack of primary care physicians. However, the articles that covered rates of illness and disease often relied on discussions of personal behaviors to *explain* health outcome disparities. Without clearly covering the social determinants of poor health outcomes, it is unlikely that the more systemic coverage of health care access and health care solutions will shift dominant, individualized thinking about health care and health care reform.

In sum, there are several positive aspects of the news coverage in Mississippi. However, the majority of coverage across issue areas tended towards individual explanations and solutions to what are fundamentally social and structural problems. FrameWorks' entire body of research has shown the communications consequences of individualizing social

problems. We see the state of coverage of these issues as an important opportunity for advocates and experts in these issue areas to move coverage in more thematic or contextualized directions. In most issue domains, there is a lack of presence in the op-ed pages, which means there is space to begin to tell new systemic stories.

Methods

This analysis explores the media's role in setting the public agenda on several issues facing Mississippi residents. It seeks to answer two linked questions: What are the major topics and dominant frames in Mississippi newspaper coverage, and do those frames advance or constrain the public's awareness of the problems being written about, and the range of public and community-based solutions that are available? These two questions reflect and help to structure the report's two primary goals: (1) an examination of how issues of race, education, health, early child development, and children's health and well-being are treated in Mississippi print media, and (2) an exploration of how patterns of media coverage are likely to affect readers' thinking about those issues.

Media texts were coded based on the topics they covered, how those topics were defined as "problems" that demand public attention, how attribution of responsibility or cause was assigned, the potential solutions proposed, and dominant messengers or sources cited in each story. Absences—i.e., what was not mentioned in media coverage—were also analyzed, drawing upon expert materials and interviews conducted by FrameWorks on many of these same issues.[iii] In the end, this report examines harmful patterns in coverage of the various issues named, as well as patterns that appear more promising for advocates and responsible journalists seeking to better explain and frame pressing social issues in Mississippi. Both quantitative and qualitative evidence are offered throughout this report to illustrate main points and support conclusions.

Through LexisNexis searches, FrameWorks selected and closely reviewed over 130 articles from a much larger sample published in ten Mississippi newspapers on these five issue areas. The articles examined were published between January 4, 2009, and January 22, 2010. Major news sources were *The Clarion-Ledger* (Jackson), *Hattiesburg American*, *Mississippi Link* (Jackson), *Biloxi Sun-Herald*, *Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal* (Tupelo), and *Mississippi Business Journal* (Jackson). Other articles included in this study appeared in the *Natchez Democrat*, the *Laurel Leader-Call*, *Mississippi Press*, and *Jackson Advocate*.

The primary aim of selection was to compile a sufficiently diverse sample of reporting to be able to offer general observations about the patterns of current news coverage on the five subject areas of interest. News items examined were identified by searching LexisNexis for the terms "Mississippi" and "race," "education," "health," and "child development." Additional search terms included "health care," "racism," "disparities," and "Delta." Coverage of early child development issues was relatively sparse. Adding search terms, such as the names of leaders in the field and centers where early child development is studied, produced the same results. In the end, searches turned up only 11

articles in that subject area. By comparison, articles on education were narrowed down to 34, on race to 32, on health to 29, and on children's health and well-being to 22. Because of FrameWorks' interest in explanatory frames, metaphors, and solutions, lengthier articles that provided more in-depth analysis of each of the five subject areas were selected over shorter pieces. An additional five articles, based on studies and reports, task forces and plans, each of which tackled *multiple* issues confronting Mississippi Delta residents, were included in the sample.

An important part of this analysis involved inventorying the components of the media script on the subjects selected. From the scholarly literature on media presentation of social issues, as well as prior FrameWorks media analyses, we know that on most issues there is a consistent and identifiable media script.[iv] While the media script on some issues is more entrenched than it is for others, there is a journalistic style of presentation on most issues that becomes fairly formulaic. Journalistic conventions lead reporters and commentators to emphasize the same things and consequently to tell similar stories.

Another particular interest of this study was the distinction between coverage that framed issues of race, education, child development, and health and well-being in an episodic manner, on the one hand, and coverage that framed the same issues thematically by contrast. As expounded by Shanto Iyengar, a leading scholar on frame effects, episodic frames maintain a focus on individuals and single events.[v] This type of coverage keeps the issue in the private realm, highlighting efforts to improve the character or effort of the person experiencing the problem, rather than addressing deeper systemic causes that shape outcomes, an approach more consistent with public health's emphasis on social determinants of health. In episodic coverage in general, and in much of the Mississippi coverage in particular, audiences are often appealed to as consumers who, if they were in possession of better information, could readily resolve their problems by making better choices. Thematic frames, by contrast, focus on issues and trends over time. They do this by examining what, at a community or systems level, led to the problem being described, and then identifying solutions and reforms in public policy arenas. Instead of appealing to audiences as consumers, thematic coverage addresses them as citizens capable of choosing between competing policies to shape better community outcomes. Thematic presentations have been shown, in decades of empirical research, to enhance the public's understanding of the policy implications of the issue being reported on.[vi] From the perspective of media effects, there is too little thematic coverage to allow Mississippians to weigh alternatives that would practically address the major issues affecting the state.

Race and Racism in Mississippi

Storytelling Style

Table 1: Storytelling Style (Race)		
	Number of stories	*Percent of stories*
Episodic	23	72%

| Thematic | 9 | 28% |

A disproportionate portion of Mississippi newspaper coverage about race was episodic, which meant that readers were provided with narrow details of an event, a solution in a single location, or a person's life, while being deprived of much of the contextual information that could have enhanced their understanding of social issues that are pervasive throughout the population. In other words, readers were more likely to have been exposed to small picture, not big picture, storytelling on the subject of race. Episodic stories about race tended to focus on behaviors, such as self-segregation, race as a topic of conversations, and interracial dating, and to rely on anecdotes. Individuals were held accountable for problems and their resolution, as if the problems being reported on existed outside of the realm of systems or structures. Virtually absent from coverage of race, whether episodic or thematic, was any historical perspective prior to the Civil Rights Era. As a result, readers were unlikely to gain insight into how race relations in Mississippi have been shaped by a legacy of slavery and a plantation economy, although on this particular point FrameWorks' research has revealed that most Americans are resistant to explanations about racism that highlight its historical legacy. This finding, then, underscores the challenge of helping Mississippians understand the structural nature of this problem, without devolving into a discussion of "how much better things are today" or issues of individual effort and self-makingness.[vii]

Personal anecdotes were a recurring element of episodic reporting about race. They tended to appear more often in stories about race than in coverage of most of the other subjects analyzed. Forty-one percent of the pieces examined in this category included at least one anecdotal story. Emblematic of an episodic approach to race, "Racism, Though Often Denied, Remains a Reality" (*Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal*, August 30, 2009) maintained a focus on individuals, treating racism as something primarily about personal defects, in this case prejudices, in need of correcting. The writer began by recounting conversations about President Obama with a longtime friend:

> 'Leslie, you know I'm not a racist, but…'
>
> That statement by a longtime friend was followed by a plethora of enumerated points regarding why she doesn't like, trust, approve of, accept, respect the current President of the United States.

The writer continued:

> To argue with folks, including my friend, who have bought into these things (various rumors about President Obama) is pointless. And to try to have a calm and meaningful conversation with them is, well, like talking to a dining room table, to borrow a few words from U.S. Rep. Barney Frank.

She proceeded to draw a parallel between the personal prejudices of her unnamed friend and the public discourse of a U.S. Congresswoman from Kansas:

> A week ago in Kansas, U.S. Rep. Lynn Jenkins told a crowd of constituents that the Republican Party, of which she is a member, is searching for a 'great white hope' to put an end to the political agenda of Democrats and President Obama.
>
> As my sweet little grandmother said many times when I engaged my mouth without engaging my mind and out popped something stupid, 'Merciful heavens.'

In the case of both the friend and the Congresswoman, racism was equated with people's mental frameworks, placing responsibility for meaningful change on those individuals, not social structures. The piece failed to examine the political implications of someone in power holding such views. This would have moved the author's example beyond the strictly personal into the policy arena. Rather, "Jenkins should be embarrassed," was the conclusion.

Personalizing social problems in this manner is a common characteristic of episodic reporting. When it forms one of the dominant narratives that structure reporting on issues of race, it does little to enhance readers' understandings of the origins, broad implications, or possible socio-political remedies for racism.

Another subject typically approached episodically was dialogue-based community events, a frequent source of media attention. In those articles, the specifics of an event were highlighted, normally within the context of the event's intended purpose and perhaps offering some information about the organizers' backgrounds and goals. Again, racism was personalized, framed as a problem of individual attitudes which, to be solved, required introspection and the shedding of old beliefs.

For example, "Mission Mississippi Hosting a 'Day of Dialog'" (*Natchez Democrat*, January 17, 2009) offered only limited context about the issues to be addressed at a dialogue-based event, and the information that *was* given—beyond practical details, such as time and location—adhered to an episodic, personalized script:

> 'You may work with a person of another race but never talk about things that are important to your race,' he (Rev. John Scott) said. 'Following work we go our separate ways, attend separate churches and most of our children attend separate schools.'
>
> 'A person attending the event will realize how little they know about people of other races and denominations….It should be a good stepping stone.'

In this example, media coverage reduced racism to the personal, vaguely suggesting that problems associated with race might be repaired if only individuals could be fixed through such types of facilitated interactions. However, there was no indication given in the stories about dialogue-based events that the tenets of anti-racism training—designed to help participants understand how racism is embedded in structures and institutions, not simply personal prejudices—would be followed.

Exemplifying another type of episodic reporting, "Vandals Deface Civil Rights Marker" (*Clarion-Ledger*, March 27, 2009) framed racially motivated vandalism as an isolated, personal act, thereby also having the likely effect of constraining the public's thinking about race and racism. With little context provided, an act of vandalism that involved defacing a marker designed to commemorate the lives of three young civil rights martyrs was treated as an aberration, essentially a stand-alone event, the perpetrator(s) as pathological. A member of the Philadelphia Coalition was quoted as saying:

> 'You can't help but be extremely disappointed that some hateful coward would perform such a juvenile and despicable act.'

While the reporter did note that a highway sign in memory of Emmett Till had previously been vandalized, there was little to suggest that the actions described in this particular story were anything more than inappropriate behaviors on the part of defective individuals, rather than part of a broader historical, cultural, and social pattern.

By contrast, newspaper pieces that followed a more thematic approach—drawing connections between disparate events, examining trends over time, and delineating a problem's systemic causes and solutions—were generally of two types: articles based on the findings of studies and op-eds. Thematic coverage more often focused on racial disparities, especially as evident in incomes, life spans, health, and level of education attained. Coverage that was thematic addressed topics more broadly in terms of how disparities impact large segments of the Mississippi population. It also tended to do a more adequate job of addressing causes and possible solutions. Rather than calling for individuals to alter their behaviors or thinking, solutions were more likely to be policy-oriented. For example, the writer of "Racial Disparities Still Part of Rational Debate" (*Hattiesburg American*, March 29, 2009) focused on disparities as the result of systemic inequalities. After chastising President Obama for his reply to a reporter's question at a news conference, the columnist wrote:

> Is it possible that the issue of race—or, more accurately, this nation's racial inequalities—never came up when the president talked to his economic advisers about poverty? Last year, the Census Bureau reported that the median income of blacks ($33,916 in 2007) was significantly lower than that of whites ($54,920). It also said that one in four black families had incomes below the poverty level, compared with just 8.2 percent of whites.

> How can the administration solve the nation's housing crisis if it doesn't understand the predatory lending practices that targeted blacks to a greater degree than any other group?

Through the example of the housing crisis, the writer illustrated for readers that racism has structural foundations—that problems confronting African Americans are not based in flawed values or poor lifestyle choices.

In another example, the article "Study: Life Span of Black Males in Mississippi Shorter" (*Clarion-Ledger*, January 27, 2009) went beyond what its headline suggested to explain how a recently released report addressed disparities:

> Those disparities are spelled out in 'A Portrait of Mississippi: The Mississippi Human Development Report 2009,' a county-by-county assessment released Monday, broken down by race, of such indicators as life span, earnings, incidence of diabetes, high school competition, crime and birth weight.

While weak in terms of explaining the causes of the disparities listed, the article did identify solutions included in the report:

> The study recommends the Legislature adopt an earned income tax credit, state minimum wages, affordable housing, affordable health care and subsidized child care to help lift up the state's poorest.

Perhaps most importantly, an explanation was offered for why confronting disparities was important not just for some, but all Mississippians:

> 'Investing in people is not just good for individual Mississippians,' the study says. 'It is also necessary for the economic growth and future competitiveness of Mississippi in the fast-changing, knowledge-based global marketplace of tomorrow.'

This framing is significant. Unless the point is made that investment involves thinking about the common good, readers who do not identify with the subject of an article are unlikely see how that problem, or its resolution, impacts them, most often because they are not the same race, class, or gender as the group who has been identified as experiencing the problem. In turn, people are less likely to support policies that would address the situation.[viii] So, for example, more affluent white readers are apt to see black Mississippians, lower-class residents, or any group that they perceive to bear little or no resemblance to themselves, as the "other," with problems of their own making. When this "otherizing" occurs, it is unlikely that those readers will see how resolving the problems described could possibly be beneficial to their own lives or even to the state as a whole. Thematic pieces are helpful because they lead readers to think about systems and policies—not individual behaviors—that have resulted in disparities based on race.

Story Placement

Newspaper coverage of timely current events or conflicts was most likely to be found in one of the news sections, either the front or the state and regional (metro) section. As we would expect, the broadest treatments of race as a subject—meaning those pieces that examined race beyond a specific newsworthy event—were generally located in the opinion sections or editorial pages. More personal treatments of race were most likely to appear in the "Lifestyle" section. What this means is that media reporting was fragmented, with coverage in each section providing only elements of the broader issue,

but not generally its full scope. News stories that focused on immediate events often lacked context that could help readers understand underlying causes and implications. By contrast, context was more likely to be provided in opinion pieces.

Focus

Table 2. Focus of Stories on Race		
	Number of stories	*Percent of stories*
Racial dialogue and healing	7	22%
Income inequality & related race-based disparities	6	19%
Black history and past segregation	5	16%
Personal prejudice, mainly black and white	4	12.5%
Anti-immigrant discrimination and prejudice	4	12.5%
Black unity and advancement	2	6%
Racial inclusiveness in public life & institutions	1	3%
Census trends	1	3%
Pending legislation (voter I.D. bill)	1	3%
Black pathologies and family breakdown	1	3%

Stories about race and racism ran a fairly wide gamut, covering everything from personal conversations about race, to pending legislation and census trends, to dialogue-based events, to racial disparities, to historical and biographical accounts of segregated Mississippi. Stories were more likely to approach racism as personal prejudice—rooted in attitudes and displayed and solved through changes in language and personal interactions—than they were to have a materialist focus on racial disparities enmeshed in an economic system and institutions. More than half of the stories in this subject area focused on such problems as cross-cultural mistrust, limited conversations between people of different races, self-segregation, racial prejudice, denial of self-responsibility, and pathological behaviors. This focus made racism appear to be solvable primarily through engagement in activities that would result in attitudinal and behavioral shifts.

That the larger pattern of media reporting was focused on personalizing race and racism, rather than exposing its various social and systemic dimensions, was likely to have the effect of limiting how readers think about the topic of race. Stories that examined disparities were most likely to break that pattern. They focused on gaps in incomes, resources, and overall quality of life based on race, along with root problems, such as poverty and high unemployment rates that adversely affect African Americans, last to be hired and first to be fired policies, and inequities in quality of education based on race. Even so, a consistent pattern in reporting on disparities was evident in the prevalence of what FrameWorks calls a "separate fates" frame, suggesting that the issues confronting

black and white residents are not linked, nor are the consequences of those problems shared. Reporting on disparities in this manner was likely to constrain people's thinking about race by setting up an "us" and "them" way of thinking. If a problem is thought to affect only "those people," the public is less likely to be receptive to thinking about the issue or supporting public solutions. Additionally, several of the stories that focused on problems that were clearly systemic, with material causes and effects, were approached episodically, with a focus on a single event, or a current controversy, but with little if any context.

Disparities

Table 3. Major Disparities Named * (Race)		
	Number of references	*% of times, overall*
Income-related	13	35%
Educational	7	19%
Health and health care	7	19%
Crime and incarceration	3	8%
Between counties	2	5%

* Some stories named more than one type of disparity

Coverage that identified disparities based on race nearly always addressed disparities as they exist between blacks and whites. The one exception was reporting on immigrant laborers, in which black and white workers were portrayed as unified in their animosity toward Mexican immigrants, who were perceived as working for less pay and hence taking away jobs. Two other inequalities identified with some frequency were those based on educational achievement, and health and the delivery of health care. Only in stories where disparities were the main focus did they receive ample attention. Multiple statistics tended to be featured in those stories and were used to illustrate, for example, state-wide disparities in income between whites and blacks, county disparities of the same, differences in the amount of education obtained, life expectancy by race, comparative dropout rates, and infant mortality rates.

The stories examined never fully explored root causes of the disparities described; they did not trace the disparities historically, and only in rare cases did they approach the topic of structural privileges and disadvantages. FrameWorks research has shown that framing issues of race around structural advantages and/or historical legacies does not resonate with most of the public, which is strongly prone to believe that racism is largely a thing of the past.[ix] What racism does exist is thought to be residual, persisting only in the attitudes of some individuals, and racial inequalities linger because of the deficient values of people of color. Individualizing or personalizing racism generally has the effect of reinforcing an ideology that holds individuals to blame for their lack of achievement or lower socioeconomic status. If media does not provide a suitable alternative frame, helping members of the public to see that there are structures in place that are

dysfunctional in that they diminish access to opportunities for some, while at the same time privileging others, then they are likely to adhere to a default frame and conclude that values or lifestyles are responsible for a person's station in life. If that default frame reinforces a belief that disparities are caused by personal flaws or faulty lifestyles or values, then there is no need for policy solutions, especially those that require costly programs. Given this sample of coverage, one is left to suspect that this is likely the case in part due to media effects on Mississippians' thinking.

While reporting in the black-owned press, particularly on the op-ed pages, was also often framed as if black and white Mississippians had separate fates, it tended to take a different approach than mainstream newspapers. *Mississippi Link* and *The Jackson Advocate* were more likely to take as a given that institutions in the United States continue to reflect old habits of systemic racism, i.e., racism is not strictly personal. Also, instead of advocating investment in programs that are funded by the legislature or designed and run by nonprofits, the black-owned press touted solutions to disparities that would come from within the black community. In other words, remedies did not originate exclusively from external institutions that have historically prevented African Americans from full participation in the society. Unity of purpose, mentoring of youth, the cultivation of leadership, a "do-for-self work ethic," and encouragement of black entrepreneurship were among the solutions named. Personal responsibility was a part of the equation as well.

Causes

Table 4. Causes Cited* (Race)		
	Number of references	*% of times, overall*
Individual behaviors, attitudes	**21**	**45%**
Racial bigotry/personal prejudice	4	9
Personal irresponsibility/other behaviors/pathologies	4	9
Other attitudes, including selfishness, distrust of politicians, lack of cultural trust	3	6
Negative self-image, dependency, insufficient spiritual resources/not confronting one's personal baggage	3	6
Private discourse, everyday conversations, dialogue, overuse of racial lens as explanatory	3	6
Family breakdown and single parenthood	2	4
Lack of understanding	1	2
Physical intimidation	1	2
Systemic/Materialist	**16**	**34%**
Economy/jobs shortage/poverty	7	15

Discriminatory hiring (and appointive) practices/white ownership/exploitation	5	11
Educational disparities/racist educational system	2	4
Institutional barriers to opportunities/lack of investment/legislation	2	4
Cultural/Public Discourse	**10**	**21%**
Cultural legacies	5	11
Public discourse/media, politicians, preachers/coarseness	5	11

* Multiple causes were assigned in several stories examined

Attributions of cause varied widely in the coverage examined on race, ranging from the personal to the systemic, from the fairly precise to the very vague. More of the problems discussed were said to be caused by individual attitudes and behaviors (45%) than material circumstances or systems (34%). Racial bigotry or personal prejudice was most frequently named as a cause of reported problems, followed by various other personal attitudes that result in individuals and groups separating themselves from one another. A related set of causes (21%) was cultural, attributing Mississippi's social problems to certain cultural legacies, or to public discourse coming from mass media, the pulpit, and politicians. When cultural causes were identified, it was clear that change was required of individuals rather than systems and that situations would improve if only individuals could shed some of their cultural baggage.

Media effects research tells us that this approach to social problems personalizes them, placing the blame or responsibility for the problem's occurrence largely on individuals and then holding individuals responsible for fixing the situation by changing how they think, behave, use language, or interact with others. Readers of articles that approached causation in this way were unlikely to come to understand why policies and programs designed to help resolve underlying structural problems were needed.

Coverage that focused on the systemic and materialist causes of problems was likely to cite the poor national and state economy, a shortage of jobs, and persistent regional poverty. Also identified were discriminatory hiring practices, employers' exploitative actions and policies based on race, educational disparities stemming from institutional racism, a lack of investment and a dearth of policies at the state level deemed to be essential correctives to the existing system. Readers of articles that approached causation in this manner would have been more likely to walk away with an understanding of how change happens systemically. As a result, they would have been more prone to see why it is important to support public policies and community-based solutions.

Solutions

Table 5. Solutions Named * (Race)		
	Number of references	*% of times, overall*

Personal and Interpersonal Change	28	62%
Dialogue	8	18%
Through church leadership	5	11
Solutions coming from within communities of color	3	7
Personal responsibility, individuals	2	4
Black history celebrations	2	4
Attitude changes	2	4
Trainings	1	2
Qualified candidates of color	1	2
Eliminating negative self-images	1	2
Good people leading discussions at all levels, personal and public	1	2
Prayer	1	2
Immigrant unity	1	2
Programs and policy solutions	17	38%
Legislation, various	4	9
Quality education for African Americans, commitment to integrated public school	2	4
Quality jobs and jobs programs	2	4
Keeping at-risk males in school and other school policy changes	2	4
Legal channels	1	2
Earned income tax credits	1	2
State minimum wage	1	2
Affordable housing	1	2
Affordable health care	1	2
Subsidized child care	1	2
Nutrition programs	1	2

* Some articles named more than one solution

Not surprisingly, solutions tended to align with causes. This meant that readers were more likely to be exposed to coverage that identified personal and interpersonal solutions to problems of race than to coverage that named solutions in the form of public policy and programs. Most solutions involved changing people, their mindsets, attitudes, and

behaviors, rather than creating and instituting new public policies to address injustices stemming from disparities. Some of the proposed solutions that involved fixing individuals, not systems, included taking personal responsibility for one's situation, not playing the "blame game"; eliminating one's own negative self-images; and working to get past one's own first impressions or prejudices based on race. Dialogue was the most frequently cited remedy of all, mainly as a solution to conflicts occurring in interpersonal relationships in an individual's everyday life. As shown above, dialogue-based events, which involved face-to-face contact with people of diverse backgrounds and the sharing of stories, were deemed valuable because they were perceived to help individuals examine and shed some of their personal baggage. When solutions were suggested at a policy level, they included a variety of legislative actions, such as providing quality education to African American residents, enacting a state minimum wage, offering subsidized child care to low-income families, strengthening nutrition programs, and using federal stimulus money to create new "green" jobs. Importantly, there was no consistent message about solutions at a systems or policy level.

While the black-owned press was more likely than the mainstream press to point out some of the structural or systemic underpinnings of racism, solutions to problems of race and racism were both materialist and mentalist. Several op-eds in the African American press called for remedies from within the black community, not mainstream public policy channels. The author of "A Prerequisite for the Ideal Black Community" (*Mississippi Link*, December 3-9, 2009) began by addressing the systemic policies that have resulted in black Americans being the last hired and first fired. The proposed solution came internally—from within the black community—in the form of a series of "new models for our collective advancement and success." The writer elaborated:

> Nearly every ethnic group in America has built an independent community that manifests its social, political and economic interests. Through building businesses and by exercising cultural assertiveness, America's diverse ethnic groups also educate their children to continue their legacies and to build upon their collective successes….

> No one will build a black community but black people, and it is only when we take ownership over the fruits of our labor that we will have the wherewithal to maintain and safeguard 'a piece of this earth that we can call our own.'

Meanwhile, "Inequality Within" (*Mississippi Link*, February 19-25, 2009) reported on income disparities based on race and then shifted the focus to the less frequently acknowledged gaps in wealth among black Americans. This piece, too, pointed to possible solutions within black communities:

> This problem can be addressed through efforts such as mentoring and opening new businesses in black communities. If one has been fortunate enough to rise, then one should consider giving others a hand.

Finally, "Unity: A Must for Black Prosperity" (*Mississippi Link*, August 6-12, 2009) connected various conditions that disproportionately affect the lives of black Americans in terms of unemployment, health care, public education, and incarceration rates, and then suggested that solutions would come only "from within our own community," through unity "traditionally opposed by the dominant culture." Vision, leadership, and unity of purpose were among the elements named as key ingredients of change.

These three examples point out some of the key differences in how race was framed and talked about in the black-owned press, and offer clues about why conversations about race, especially in racially mixed groups, are fraught with challenges.

Who Benefits

As for who would benefit if problems associated with race and racism were solved, 40% of the coverage identified only one group, black Mississippians, as beneficiaries. In 44% of the coverage, all Mississippians appeared to benefit from the problem being solved. In the remaining coverage, it was unclear who would benefit. Sometimes the beneficiaries were clearly stated, while in other cases, who would benefit was merely suggested or implied. FrameWorks (and many other researchers)[x] has determined that this aspect of news reporting has a tremendous impact on audiences. When people are prompted to make connections that help them comprehend how resolving problems that most directly impact some would make a difference to all, then they are more likely to engage in conversation about and support public policy solutions.

News Sources and Statistics

Table 6. News Sources or Messengers Quoted (Race)		
	Number of individuals quoted by category	*% of times, overall*
Dialogue leaders	8	16%
Immigrant advocates	8	16%
Ministers	6	12%
Immigrant workers	6	12%
Elected officials, state and local	6	12%
Civil rights and NAACP leaders	4	8%
Non-immigrant laborers and union leaders	2	4%
Non-profit leaders	2	4%
Film directors, photographers	2	4%
Economists and other academics	2	4%

Report authors	1	2%
Contractors	1	2%
University chancellor	1	2%

FrameWorks research shows that the messengers or news sources chosen and quoted can be as important as the way the story is framed.[xi] In the case of race, there were no dominant sources of information and quotes in the articles examined. Reporters turned most frequently to organizers of public dialogues, including ministers. Elected officials were also quoted with some frequency. Nearly all of these messengers spoke about some immediate, newsworthy event, such as a pending piece of legislation, an upcoming dialogue session, or a recent factory raid. Noticeably absent from media conversations on the topic of race were historians, social scientists, and economists. This meant that academics, who might have illuminated broader issues and helped connect dots, were rarely sought out to comment on race and racism.

Media Script on Race and Racism, a Summary

In the period covered, the dominant script on race in the mainstream press focused on the behaviors and communications patterns of individuals. In this script, racism was framed around personal prejudices or bigotry, not systems, structures, or institutions. More often than not what FrameWorks calls a "mentalist" approach was applied to problems of race in Mississippi newspapers. Reporters sought explanations and solutions for the problems they described in the thought patterns of individuals.[xii] In addition, reporting either implied or directly stated that racial matters had improved over the past 50 years, due largely to key Supreme Court rulings and the passage of federal civil rights legislation. From that perspective, any residual racism remained at the level of individuals. Overcoming one's personal attitudes was framed as something that happens internally, a matter of people confronting their own "baggage." Dialogue was viewed as crucial to this process, with churches described as playing instrumental roles through the sponsorship and facilitation of dialogue-based events. While the dominant media script emphasized the value of such interactions, it also highlighted several of the challenges involved in talking about race.

Because proportionately more attention was devoted to personal causes and solutions than to societal or systemic ones, readers of Mississippi newspapers during the period examined were likely to conclude that any remaining changes in race relations and improvement in quality of life for people of color would come principally through shifts in individuals' attitudes and behaviors. Barring exposure to alternative frames, the public might reasonably conclude that any improvement in the condition of minority residents' lives would come through changes in behaviors and values among members of those populations. As noted, the opportunity to converse and share stories with people of different races was offered as a key element in this process of eliminating residual racism. Both storylines were likely to reinforce dominant cultural patterns that shape how Americans have come to think about race, constraining the public's understanding of the problems being reported, and the range of public and community-based solutions

available to address them. When social problems are transformed into individual problems in this manner, then the brunt of responsibility for solving them rests primarily on the shoulders of individuals. Consequently there is no need for policy solutions or changes at the level of systems and structures.

A less common, materialist media script was shaped by the findings of reports on disparities. Instead of reporting on events as if they had occurred in a bubble, this coverage was more thematic, drawing connections for readers, helping to show a big picture and, to varying degrees, enhancing their understanding of the external systemic or institutional barriers to opportunities and a decent quality of life based on one's race. Stories that followed this script were more likely to stress the value of investing in people through new programs. Some emphasized the importance of access to a quality education, said to be a fundamental stepping stone, essential for opening up opportunities for employment and a more equitable and stable income for all. In these stories, change at a policy level was said to be a necessary ingredient for improving the quality both of African American residents' lives and the economy of the entire state. Even when flawed, reporting of this type had the potential to nudge the public's thinking, to help readers see the structural dimensions of racism and racial disparities, and to move the public conversation about race in a different direction.

Education

Storytelling Style

Table 7 Storytelling Style (Education)		
	Number of stories	*Percent of stories*
Episodic	24	71%
Thematic	10	29%

The vast majority of articles examined, 71%, treated education issues episodically. For example, the following article consisted largely of quotes from parents who had learned, just prior to commencement that their children would not be graduating because they had failed a state-mandated exam. With no points of view other than the parents', and insufficient background regarding the problem, the article read like a registry of personal complaints.

> Waverly Jones said her daughter was one of them. Jones said her daughter earned all her credits, but did not pass the state test and did not graduate.
>
> 'He (the superintendent) didn't even let them march. If he was not going to let her march, then they shouldn't have let her pay for the cap and gown,' Jones said.

'My daughter paid for a cap and gown and then the superintendent wouldn't let her march….I also asked the superintendent for a letter for the state's appeal process and he would not give her a letter.'

Carolyn Jones, the mother of a Laurel High School senior who was selected to compete at the International Sports Specialist, Inc.'s Down Under International Games, said her son missed the required score on the state test by one point.

As a result, her son did not receive his diploma and will not be able to take advantage of several opportunities. ("Parents: Laurel Students Not Allowed to Graduate," *Laurel Leader-Call*, June 12, 2009)

Besides lacking a serious foundation that might assist readers in better understanding the arguments for and against mandated testing, this story proposed no solutions, other than to have parents warn other parents about what might happen to their children, as in the case of this father:

'I just want parents to beware because their high school senior next year may be the victim,' he said. 'The future of our children will not depend on how well they perform in school. It will be determined by how well they perform on one test.'

It was noted that no comment was issued from the Laurel School District. This lack of comment from school officials had the effect of further narrowing the scope of the story so that it appeared to have little meaning beyond the gripes of the parents quoted. When readers are exposed to reporting of this kind they are likely to conclude that the subjects are vulnerable victims, trapped in a bad situation. Lacking broader context, the situation itself has no larger meaning, and no connection to other events, past or present, or to what might be occurring in other locations.

Some articles were more successful at blending personal stories with broader contextual information about the problem being described. For example, another article opened with a story about and quotes from Nichelle Henderson, a 34-year-old woman with no job, no high school diploma, and suddenly no husband.

Nichelle Henderson knows she wouldn't have been able to go back to school without the support she has received.

'I think it's imperative that people look for ways to get an education,' she said, 'There are ways.' ("Child Care, Transportation Obstacles to Higher Ed," *Clarion-Ledger*, November 2, 2009)

This article branched out fairly quickly into the findings of a newly released report:

A new report from the Mississippi Economic Policy Center suggests that, in order to meet the state's workforce demands, Mississippi should reach out more to

nontraditional students such as Henderson, and address the hurdles they face while going back to school.

The reporter connected initiatives that would help meet the state's workforce demands with the future of the state's economy. She cited the report's recommendations that called for increased funding for adult education and support services, like transportation and child care, for adult students. Even though the article opened and closed with Henderson's story, readers were likely to walk away with an understanding of the broader implications of the subject, i.e., that this was about something larger, more pervasive, than the challenges facing one woman.

While both of these stories offered anecdotal information, most of the articles on this subject refrained from that practice. Articles about budget cut proposals were likely to stick to issues being debated and to feature a series of quotes from key players, the governor or the governor's spokesperson, for example, or legislators, students, or alumni of the schools that would be affected.

Here is how one article, "Gov. Proposes Merges, Closures," (*Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal*, November 17, 2009) reported the story of merges and consolidations:

> Universities would be merged, school districts consolidated and mental health centers closed if the 2010 Legislature accepts the budget proposal released Monday by Gov. Haley Barbour.
>
> Barbour said his far-reaching proposal is a way to deal with the current economic downturn that has resulted in state tax collections slumping to historically low levels.
>
> 'I think this is the way to get to where we have to go,' Barbour said during a news conference…. 'Sometimes you have to look your friends in the eyes and tell them something they don't want to hear.'

Despite the lack of personal stories, most of the articles that dealt with budget cuts concentrated strictly on the immediate problem and offered little in the way of contextual, background information. That is, these types of stories still remained in the episodic mode of storytelling.

Only 29% of the stories examined approached educational issues thematically, exploring an issue over time by identifying its systemic causes, taking into account public policy solutions, and treating readers as citizens. For example, "State of Region Sounds Wake-Up Call" (*Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal*, May 22, 2009) covered the gap in incomes between Northeast Mississippians and residents in the rest of state as well as the nation at large. The reporter cited low education levels as the cause of inequity and then went on to explain the low levels of education in this part of the state.

The story suggested two primary causes for this gap. One was the lack of early childhood education programs.

> Eighty percent of brain development occurs between birth and age 4. Early childhood education is an essential component of making sure children arrive at kindergarten ready to learn to read.

The other was "cultural": "The overarching challenge revolves around a culture shift about the value of education for all Mississippians." Causes were followed by a discussion of possible solutions. "'The solutions aren't rocket science, but they aren't easy,' said (former) State Superintendent of Education Hank Bounds."

One of the avenues of change suggested was through community colleges' efforts to attract the 400,000 Mississippians who had dropped out of school without a diploma. Another long-term solution was funding of early childhood education. According to this story, "Early childhood education is an essential component of making sure children arrive at kindergarten ready to learn to read." Other solutions listed by the Southern Education Foundation, all part of a "broad community effort," were adequate resources for learning, increased resources for students who need the most help, improved teacher quality and supply, enhanced college preparation and more financial aid.

In the proportion of thematic stories, readers were more likely to grasp the scope of the problem being described. They were also offered a foundation for understanding why investment is needed for the good of Mississippi's children and the state as a whole. As a result, these kinds of articles could help advance the public conversation about education and increase support for public solutions to problems facing Mississippi public school students.

Story Placement

As with race, discussion of educational issues occurred mainly in the two front news sections and on the editorial and op-ed pages of newspapers. Two topics as likely to be addressed on the opinion pages as in the news sections of Mississippi newspapers were the governor's attempt to merge historically black colleges and universities with mainstream institutions of higher education, and the importance of improving school standards and retention rates as a means of bolstering the state's economy.

Focus

Table 8. Focus of Stories on Education		
	Number of stories	*Percent of stories*
Impact of state budget cut proposals on K-12 public schools and higher education funding	10	29%
Comprehensive sex education curricula and other efforts to	7	20%

address teen sexuality and parenthood in schools		
Educational disparities by race and region/correlation between education, business, jobs, and the state's economy	5	15%
Mandated testing in schools, "No Child Left Behind," accountability measures	5	15%
Resegregation of schools/majority non-white enrollments in public schools	4	12%
Assistance for non-traditional students	1	3%
Technology grants for underserved schools	1	3%
Corporal punishment in schools	1	3%

Newspaper coverage throughout the 12-month period focused largely on three current issues: budget proposals that would impact specific school districts, colleges, and universities; calls to abandon "abstinence only" sex education in light of sobering statistics on the high rate of teen pregnancy and STDs in Mississippi; and ongoing struggles to bolster low test scores on mandated tests, as well as the consequences of not achieving those goals. It was because each of these issues was the source of ongoing controversy that so much space was devoted to them. Conflict made them newsworthy.

The governor's proposal to merge the administration of historically black colleges and universities, so that their administration would be placed under the control of larger mainstream institutions of higher learning, was either condemned as "racist" because it would impact only black colleges and universities, or prudent, for stressing efficiency and looking out for the good of the state, not appeasing those who support anachronistic institutions based on loyalty and tradition, as one columnist consistently argued.

Proposed public school cuts and mergers were alternately described as necessary in light of the state's revenue shortfall or faulted for being the exact wrong prescription with far-reaching consequences. This because the state's public school system is widely known to be underperforming, producing the highest number of high school dropouts in the nation, leaving young people unprepared for the job market, and ultimately impacting the performance of the state's economy.

Meanwhile, proposals to introduce more comprehensive sex education curricula were deemed controversial for cultural reasons—proponents arguing that adjustments were essential to stem the tide of teen pregnancies and STD rates, while reporters and editorialists noted that such changes were unlikely to be approved in a state steeped in "Bible Belt" culture. Reporting on this subject highlighted statistics that showed Mississippi having the highest rate of teen pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases in the United States. That problem was shown to have ripple effects, affecting the chances that young mothers would remain in school, which in turn limits their options for employment, and ultimately, once again, Mississippi's economy.

State testing was also a source of divisiveness, with advocates arguing that such tests are necessary to raise the standards and performance of Mississippi's public schools, in the end making the state more competitive economically, while critics offered that standardized tests were not designed with students' educations in mind.

Other issues receiving attention tended to come to light in conjunction with the release of new research findings or news about public events. Driven by newly released reports— the news angle or hook—these stories also generally offered more context to problems having long histories and no simple, clear-cut solutions. For example, "'New Diverse Majority'" (*Hattiesburg American*, January 18, 2010) was prompted by a report produced by the Southern Education Foundation on the changing demographics of Mississippi's public schools. "Another Look at Segregation" (*Biloxi Sun Herald*, May 17, 2009) was published in conjunction with a panel discussion event that addressed segregation in present-day Mississippi schools. Rather than focusing on conflict, stories based on reports like these were more likely to confront some of the widespread disparities in the state or to cover other problems that were not time bound by, for example, the legislative session.

What was most noticeably lacking in this subject area was coverage of the resegregation of Mississippi schools. As reported in "Ruling on Racial Isolation in Miss. Schools Reflects Troubling Broader Trend" (*Washington Post*, April 20, 2010):

> More than half a century after courts dismantled the legal framework that enforced segregation, Obama administration officials are investigating an array of practices across the country that contribute to a present-day version that they say is no less insidious.

That story went on to explain that:

> Although minority students have the legal right to attend any school, federal officials are questioning whether in practice many receive less access than white students to the best teachers, college prep courses and other resources. Department of Education lawyers are also investigating whether minority students are being separated into special education classes without justification, whether they are being disciplined more harshly and whether districts are failing to provide adequate English language programs for students who are not fluent, among other issues.

Nowhere in the Mississippi newspaper coverage examined was any of this brought to light, even though, as the *Post* reported, studies have shown schools drifting back into segregation since the 1980s, when the federal government became less aggressive in its enforcement. This trend continued after the Supreme Court ruled in 2007 that school districts cannot make racial balance a policy goal unless they are attempting to comply with a federal desegregation order.

One consequence of the choices made about what to cover and what *not* to cover was that readers were exposed primarily to stories about education that dealt with smaller, more immediate issues, often with limited context provided. When possible solutions were identified, the likelihood of them coming to fruition was reported to be diminished by financial realities. Furthermore it was uncommon for education reporting to link a situation described in one school or district to larger structural or systemic forces. More often stories focused on the small picture of what was occurring in one school or school district. FrameWorks research has shown that two elements—ending on a positive, solution-oriented note, and illustrating how a specific, local situation fits into a broader story and context—are prerequisites for advancing public policy-level solutions. On neither count did education reporting measure up well overall.

Disparities

Table 9. Disparities Named * (Education)		
	Number of references	*% of times, overall*
Geographical (within state and in comparison with the rest of the nation, plus one global comparison)	18	72%
Racial (and school performance, graduation rates, income levels, student/teacher ratios by race)	5	20%
Socioeconomic class	1	4%
School performance and language skills	1	4%

Disparities were largely downplayed in education coverage. Disparity by geographical region, within the state or between states, was the most frequently named disparity in newspaper stories.

Emblematic of this approach, "Region Needs a Reality Jolt on Our Senses" (*Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal*, May 24, 2009) addressed various disparities, including those based on per capita income, education levels, and child poverty rates, all areas in which the northeastern part of the state trailed the nation and the rest of Mississippi:

> If you've lived in Mississippi for any length of time, you've no doubt grown weary of hearing our long list of lasts. Last in educational attainment and performance. Last in health. Last in per capita income.
>
> These are just a few of the most crucial indicators. The list goes on, more or less indefinitely, in a litany of inter-related deficiencies.
>
> Where we are first or in the top tier of states, it's usually in a negative indicator— poverty, teen pregnancy, incarceration rate, among others.

Far less frequent were articles that linked disparities in education to socioeconomic status and/or race. "Education is the Answer" (*Mississippi Business Journal*, June 8, 2009) was

one article that did link disparities in Mississippi schools directly to income or socioeconomic class, but was largely linked to the financial or business implications of these disparities:

Rosie Vassallo, executive director of the Madison City Chamber of Commerce, said, 'That is very important (in luring new business and industry.) That's the No. 1 question prospects have, is the schools.'

From this perspective, the implementation of conservative educational reform measures at the state level—a school achievement rating system and a "failing schools" law, the "Children First Act of 2009"—was assumed to be essential to bolstering the level of quality of school districts throughout the state. If there were criticisms of either measure, that perspective was not provided.

One of the rarer stories that focused on *race*-based disparities was "'New Diverse Majority'" (*Hattiesburg American*, January 18, 2010), published in conjunction with the release of a report by the Southern Education Foundation. An initial quote set the tone:

> 'Our income data for students do not go back to 1950, but I think it is accurate to say that Mississippi has had a predominately low-income, non-white majority in the public schools at least for half a century,' said SEF Vice President and report author Steve Suitts by e-mail.

This quote placed Mississippi at the forefront of a broader trend toward more pronounced segregation throughout the region:

> You might call it the new solid South. For the first time, a majority of public school students in the South are non-white and poor, according to a report released by the Atlanta-based research group Southern Education Foundation.

This fact was significant, according to the SEF report, because, "the South, the region of the nation with the worst history of expanding and extending equal opportunity to all of its people…faces the greatest challenge to do just that now and in the future." The story proceeded from this "opportunity to all" frame, to relay a number of statistics that illustrated the educational disparities facing Mississippi—including high school graduation rates that lag far behind the national average, the percentage of black students in the Hattiesburg School District that qualify for free and reduced cost meals, and the ratio by race of students and teachers.

While some aspects of this piece were likely to lead readers to think about problems in terms of separate fates, other elements could serve to help readers see the situation described as one of interdependence. For example, one of many points made was that "experts concur that lack of education is a drag on the state." A senior economist with the state College Board Office of Policy Research and Planning drew the connection between education and the state's economic recovery:

'This has tremendous impact on the economy,' Webb said. 'We know that work force participation goes up with the degree of education…and we know that income is tremendously affected as well by the level of education.'

Solutions cited in the story involved fixing systems, not people, although, as in much of the reporting on education, resolutions to problems were said to be hampered by economic circumstances:

One challenge facing the state's education system, of course, is funding. A projected $400 million sales tax revenue shortfall for 2010 means that Mississippi schools, already reeling from state-mandated cuts, can expect more of the same.

'There is only so much you can do to raid revenue in a struggling economy,' Webb said. 'Everyone, I think, is going to be cut.'

The reporter emphasized that factors other than money were at play as well:

But it isn't just about obtaining money. For Southern Miss education professor Tom O'Brien, the demographic realities of Mississippi and the South demand a change in how teachers are trained.

'Historically, we prepare teachers who are white, female and middle-class,' said O'Brien, whose research emphasis is the history of American education in the 20th century. 'That's not going to change. What needs to change is how we prepare people by teaching them to be competent across cultures.'

By adopting the frame of "expanding and extending equal opportunity to all"—which appears to be how the study reported on was framed—the reporter did a fairly effective job of pinpointing why the goal of expanding and extending equal opportunity to all is important to all Mississippians, especially in terms of improving the state's economy. The story also delineated challenges, again in a way that highlighted systems, and pointed to some potential solutions.

While disparities in education were often downplayed in the articles of this sample, there were some promising trends in this kind of coverage. The emphasis on geographical disparities is an important trend. Extensive empirical research by FrameWorks has shown that this frame reaches readers in a way that frames focusing on explicitly on race do not.[xiii] By addressing disparities in this manner, media coverage becomes about fairness between places or, more specifically, about fairness in the distribution of resources across communities. This helps the public to think in terms of systems and be more receptive to entertaining policies that could reduce disparities.[xiv]

Causes

Table 10. Causes Cited* (Education)

	Number of references	% of times, overall
Mandated cuts to education due to low state tax revenues	7	13%
Poverty, low income	6	12%
Cultural attitudes	5	10%
Inadequate parenting	5	10%
Lack of community commitment	3	6%
Testing, overemphasis on scores, inadequate exam preparation	3	6%
Politics	3	6%
Institutional racism	3	6%
Poor teaching and administration, insufficient teacher prep and training	2	4%
Insufficient resources	2	4%
Popular culture	2	4%
Pathologies and family dysfunction	2	4%
Low educational attainment rates	2	4%
School policies	1	2%
Immigrant influx	1	2%
Insufficient information for making good choices	1	2%
No state-funded early (pre-kindergarten) education	1	2%
Shortage of strong adult role models	1	2%
Personal attitudes	1	2%
Link between poor schools and state's ability to attract business	1	2%

In several of the articles problems were attributed to a wide range of causes, so that personal attitudes and behaviors were identified alongside social and cultural factors. Most prominent, however, were political, social, and economic causes, which were named in 62% of the articles, including those articles and opinion pieces that reported and commented on the state's budget shortfall.

"Barbour Wrong to Cut School Budget" (*Hattiesburg American*, September 14, 2009) took the governor to task for proposing deeper cuts when the state's investment in education already ranks near the bottom of all fifty states:

The money we haven't spent on education often translates into much more money we'll someday spend on the 'uncuttable' costs of incarceration. Pay the price to educate our children well, and the industry will come, the salaries will increase and the money state government has to spend will follow suit.

Interdependence was played up in this op-ed piece, its author evaluating the situation from a systems perspective, not an individualistic one. Framed in this way, all residents were said to be part of a system, one that required educating every child in the state, to ensure that all Mississippians thrive. The writer made a firm argument that education needs to be funded, and that if funded there will be ripple effects.

Approximately 22% of the coverage examined cited private—either personal or family failings—causes. Examples included family dysfunctions, children's overexposure to popular culture, a shortage of adult role models, and problematic personal attitudes about education. Occasionally inadequate parenting skills were identified as a cause of children's poor performance in school.

For example, in "'New Diverse Majority,'" a Hattiesburg School District spokesperson cited parental lack of involvement as one in a mix of causes of problems that often lead to poor school performance:

> Spokesman Jas N. Smith said while the district has implemented a number of programs to improve student achievement, the biggest challenge his district faces comes from outside the classroom. 'We need parental involvement and parental participation,' said Smith, citing a study that stated parental involvement was twice as important as socioeconomic status in predicting student success.

Cultural or community attitudes were identified in an additional 16% of newspaper stories as the source of Mississippi's educational problems. Examples included "lack of community commitment" ("Dropouts Siphon off Too Many Students," *Hattiesburg American*, May 25, 2009) and the need for a "culture shift about the value of education for all Mississippians" ("State of Region Sounds Wake-Up Call").

Because the public is predisposed to think in individualistic terms about social problems, readers were more likely to be drawn to those stories about poor student performance and other problems in schools that were framed around personal or familial causes. More useful in terms of shifting that pattern were those news stories and opinion pieces, which illustrated that people belong to systems. Such stories help the public to see how problems and solutions impact the lives of everyone. As a result, they have the potential to pave the way for more constructive conversations about education and public policy.

Solutions

Table 11. Solutions Named * (Education)

	Number of references	% of times, overall
Legislation, public policy, programs	11	26%
Parental oversight, adult role models	8	19%
Curriculum changes	7	17%
Adjustments in state testing methods and preparation	5	12%
Communities of color and supporters of historically black colleges and universities addressing problems internally	3	7%
State-supported early (pre-K) education	1	2%
Reporting infractions to the ACLU	1	2%
Changes in teacher training	1	2%
Democratic legislators' proposal alternatives for funding public education	1	2%
Schools voluntarily cutting expenses	1	2%
Changed consciousness or mindset among youth of color	1	2%
Improved self-esteem	1	2%
Dialogue	1	2%

Solutions identified in media coverage were more likely to come from within the public realm than the private. Those involving changes in systems (75%) outnumbered those that connected change to altered personal behaviors or attitudes (25%). Most public solutions involved action on the part of legislators, the governor, and in some cases nonprofit organizations. However, there was often a note of doubt about whether or not change was likely. The primary roadblock, again, was funding. A secondary barrier was political, rooted in dissension between Republican and Democratic lawmakers. Public solutions included, but were not limited to, additional English language programs and resources, including computer software and supplemental instruction; improved teacher training methods; state funding for support services for adult students; increased tobacco tax to fund programs; grants to help add new technologies to the classroom; and legislation to require more comprehensive sex education in the schools. Solutions that focused on changing individual behaviors included caring parents; children and parents raising expectations of themselves; black and Latino young people coming to understand their "unique abilities to become world changers"; and building self-esteem. Dialogue, a prominent solution for confronting problems associated with race, received one mention.

Unless journalists utilize frames that illustrate how a solution affects the public as a whole, not just one segment of the population, readers are inclined in this individualistic culture to be drawn to solutions that require change on the part of individuals. When individuals are held responsible for their own lives, government is not part of the picture, nor is the public being asked to open its pocketbook. This is even more likely to be the

default frame among the public in states where limited government is held as a primary political value.

Who Benefits

Articles about education were somewhat more likely to suggest that the entire state would benefit (44%) from a problem's resolution than particular segments of the population (37%). In the remaining coverage it was unclear if there was a beneficiary. Once again, if the broader public is prevented from seeing how everyone benefits—if instead stories are framed in ways that make it appear that only "other people's children" stand to benefit from new policies—then people become less engaged and supportive of possible reforms.

News Sources and Statistics

Table 12. News Sources or Messengers Quoted* (Education)		
	Number of individuals quoted by category	*% of times, overall*
State legislators	15	19%
School superintendents	8	10%
Former State Schools Superintendent (Bounds)	7	9%
Parents	5	6%
Commissioner of Higher Education (Bounds)	4	5%
Public health officials	4	5%
Professors	3	4%
University students	3	4%
Principals and other school officials	2	2.5%
Governor Haley Barbour	2	2.5%
Governor's spokesman	2	2.5%
College alumna	2	2.5%
NAACP personnel	2	2.5%
Public school teachers	2	2.5%
K-12 students	2	2.5%
Economists	2	2.5%
Researchers and policy analysts	2	2.5%
Planned Parenthood officials	2	2.5%

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Most of the news sources quoted on education (83%) were public figures. One person was quoted far more frequently than any other. Hank Bounds, Commissioner of Higher Education and former State Schools Superintendent, was quoted in 11 articles. As such, he became the leading authority on education in Mississippi newspapers and belonged to the category of decision makers—which included legislators, other elected officials, and superintendents—who were far more prominent in media coverage than parents, students, and teachers. While Bounds appeared well informed, thoughtful, and articulate, the tendency of reporters to go directly to him for quotes had the effect of crowding out other voices and ideas that may have been circulating during this period. Elected officials were frequently quoted on the subject of education, too, particularly when it came to why cuts were needed and what their potential impact might be. These public figures cited the need for more funding, but were resigned to making cuts. Those who are capable of being trusted spokespersons on school issues because their lives are most directly impacted on a day-to-day basis by what occurs in schools, were quoted in only 17% of the articles. The majority of statistics used in newspaper reporting illustrated how poorly Mississippi ranks on various measures (including high school graduation rates, teen pregnancies, incomes, and exam performance) when compared to other states. These numbers helped to illustrate the severity of the problems facing Mississippians, but also fed into the "dead last" narrative, capable of inducing a sense of crisis and therefore hopelessness on the part of the public.

Media Script on Education, a Summary

Newspaper reporting on education generally concentrated on timely, often controversial, hot-button issues, such as calls for comprehensive sex education curricula in public schools, the Governor's proposal to merge the administrations of historically black colleges and universities, and consequences of mandated testing in the schools. Less attention was given to long-term disparities and funding priorities that have resulted in many children in Mississippi receiving inferior educations throughout the state's history.

Several recurring elements contributed to a dominant media script about education. For one, news coverage was always about public schools and the challenges facing them, challenges accentuated by a looming budget crisis. Overlooked in most stories was the fact that K-12 schools are highly segregated in the state, with wealthier, mostly white children attending private schools, and that more resources are available for schools in wealthier counties of the state.

That education is a public good that requires investment was another element of the media script. This was an especially prominent thread in stories and opinion pieces that involved the state budget. The prevailing theme in such stories was that public schools are facing new constraints—the result of revenue shortfalls leading to budget cuts—and that cutting programs places public schools in a crisis mode, albeit not an unfamiliar one in a poor state where the popular preference is for limited government. In this media script, public officials—legislators and the governor—were held chiefly responsible for

fixing problems, but due to limited resources and political infighting, were said to lack the capacity to move the issue forward in a meaningful manner.

In addition, the media script on education was mostly ahistorical and did not connect the dots in ways that readers of all backgrounds would come to understand how vital investment in education is to all residents and to the entire state's economy. Exceptions to this pattern were evident to some degree in stories about the governor's proposal to merge the administration of historically black colleges and universities with mainstream institutions of higher learning, and in those recounting landmark legal decisions designed to end practices of segregation in public schools, both of which were told against the backdrop of Mississippi's racial history.

Another recurring, but less prominent, element in the media script on education involved the link between residents' education level, their employment and income status, and the state's overall economy. As the American Human Development Project's "A Portrait of Mississippi" observed:

> Mississippi has some of the worst scores in the nation on most measures of K-12 educational quality. It is difficult to imagine how the state can make economic progress when the future workforce is deprived of the opportunity to develop even basic skills, much less the higher-order skills needed to obtain better-paying jobs, such as independence of thought, communications skills, interpersonal skills, and technology literacy.[xv]

That particular point, that education, jobs, and the state's economy are intertwined, each having a bearing on the other, with education being the crucial building block from which all else stems, was made in some of the newspaper reporting, particularly the business press and by business leaders. However, it was not a consistent theme in the articles examined. This is worth emphasizing because FrameWorks' research would suggest that this particular frame helps readers to grasp that funding education is essential, and that the results of a better supported and funded system extend to all residents of the state in the form of new industry and jobs.[xvi]

The media script on education drove home the point that public schools in Mississippi rank poorly compared to their counterparts in other states. The dropout rate remains high and many who do graduate are recipients of subpar educations. A subtheme was that this has a bearing on residents' ability to garner suitable income, which impacts the state's overall economy. Rarely were the prospects of the situation said to be promising, this because the state is facing a budget crisis, which was said to only worsen the situation. Furthermore, in the majority of the coverage it was not made clear how everyone in the state would benefit from new policy measures. With few viable solutions identified in education coverage, and without a clear sense of how reforms might benefit all, the prospects for advancing public policy-level solutions to educational problems were diminished.

Finally, stories about education were mostly told in ways that focused in general, not personal, terms on an issue currently facing the public. Only 17% of the stories examined in this subject area featured any anecdotes from parents, students, educators, or other individuals, and in only one or two of the stories did anecdotes dominate an article. Even though the focus of media coverage was on issues, not personal stories, it did not mean that sufficient explanations of systems-level causes or specific systemic solutions were offered. As with media coverage of race, it was questionable whether in all or most cases a reader would walk away from a story about education in Mississippi with an enhanced understanding of the issue at hand or its policy implications.[xvii]

Early Child Development

Storytelling Style

Table 13. Storytelling Style (Early Child Development)		
	Number of stories	*Percent of stories*
Mixed	6	55%
Episodic	3	27%
Thematic	2	18%

Early child development was most often approached thematically or with a mix of thematic and episodic elements. Most stories provided sufficient context to allow readers to understand the issues and solutions being addressed and proposed. "Programs Aim to Give Pre-K Pupils Even Start" (*Clarion-Ledger*, April 10, 2009) opened this way:

> Children who start kindergarten are unable to recite their ABCs, identify shapes or even spell their names likely will remain behind academically throughout their school career, according to research.
>
> One reason many children in Mississippi start out unprepared is lack of access to a state-funded pre-kindergarten program.
>
> Brain research says a lot of growth happens before children are 5 years old, says Laurie Smith, an expert in early childhood education. By third grade, if children haven't caught up, they are likely to have those problems for the rest of their lives, she said.

The article continued by expanding on the causes of the problem:

> Mississippi is one of 12 states with no state-funded pre-kindergarten program. Instead, there are several community-level programs scattered around the state aimed at giving students a foundation for their education. The programs, however, cannot reach all of the children in need of the basics.

This emphasis on causes was important because it could help illustrate for readers that privately funded programs are not a comprehensive solution. In addition, the piece noted that the state has a high poverty rate and that research shows that children who grow up in poverty are likely to be less prepared for school than their more affluent peers. In all, it was a satisfying narrative from a framing perspective.

"Investing in Early Education: The Building Blocks for Success" (*Hattiesburg American*, May 9, 2009), an op-ed co-written by Laurie Smith, executive director of Mississippi Building Blocks, also took a thematic approach to early child development and added an important element. In this case, the authors emphasized how vital early child education is to the state's economy: "At a time when the stock market is slumping, Mississippians are making the smartest investment possible in an uncertain economy," the writers began. They continued:

> Together with national foundations, Mississippi's business and charitable communities have contributed $5 million—and aim to raise a total of $10 million—for an early childhood education program that will reap returns in an improved business climate, a better-prepared workforce, and more good-paying jobs. On top of that, we'll strengthen our social fabric and our state's finances, as more vulnerable young people are put on a path that leads to productive lives and responsible citizenship, not dependency and anti-social behavior.

Importantly, the writers repeatedly made a point of stating how the programs they described would impact all of Mississippi:

> There is real reason to hope that the results will be beneficial to our entire state and its educational system and economic environment.

The majority of coverage on early child development was framed in terms of the values of stewardship, future, interaction and opportunity, values that have proven powerful in FrameWorks' own research for engaging the public conversation that needs to take place in order to prioritize the constellation of policies associated with school readiness.[xviii]

In addition to these well-framed articles, there were also less productive trends in the reporting on early child development. For example, less effective at conveying the message about the need for supporting and funding early childhood education was a piece that mixed episodic and thematic elements in a way that might direct readers to conclude that what is most important is that individuals alter their behaviors through voluntary acts of kindness. Written by then-State Superintendent of Education Hank Bounds, the op-ed, "As Child's First Teacher, Mothers Need Support from Others" (*Mississippi Link*, May 28-June 4, 2009), began by focusing on individual mothers and what must happen in the privacy of their homes to aid early childhood development:

> From reading to them to preparing them a nutritious breakfast and giving them words of encouragement, mothers help their children do well on the Mississippi

Curriculum Test in a number of ways. Certainly, learning begins at birth and preparing to succeed in school begins well before a child enters kindergarten.

The writer then concludes:

While the report outlines many of Mississippi's problems, it ignores its greatest strength: its people. Mississippians are always ready to open their hands and hearts to help others. I hope that everyone who knows a mother who is struggling will reach out with a helping hand, whether in a personal or professional capacity.

This is a classic "Family Bubble" narrative that constrains accountability to family members and their individual efforts.[xix] By opening and closing with a personalized, episodic frame, this piece was less likely to leave readers with the primary messages of the Save the Children report, particularly its recommendations for increased investment and government support for each of the programs that Bounds had listed. For readers prone to thinking in terms of personal –solutions—most Americans—it is easier to be comforted with the idea of lending a hand, than it is to entertain funding government programs, a public solution.

Story Placement

Reporting on early child development was placed in a range of newspaper sections, but was most likely to appear in the two main news sections ("A" or "State & Local") of Mississippi newspapers. This subject area was the least likely to receive attention of op-ed or editorial writers. This may represent as much an opportunity as an omission.

Focus

Table 14. Focus of Stories on Early Child Development		
	Number of stories	*Percent of stories*
Early child development programs or centers	5	45%
Leaders in the field of early child development	3	27%
Connections between early (pre-kindergarten) education and the state's economic recovery	1	9%
Mother's role in early child development	1	9%
Legislative support	1	9%

Most of the stories in this subject area focused either on a specific program that serves to advance early child development, such as Friends of Mississippi, Mississippi Building Blocks, or the Center for Child Development, or on a leader in the field, the two main ones being Laurie Smith and Cathy Grace. Emphasis was mainly on ideas that propelled a program, center, or leader. Less common were articles that focused on pending legislation, the role of mothers in a child's early development, or links between early

childhood education and the state's economic recovery. Because most of the articles noted how crucial early education is to a child's development, performance in school, and ultimately what opportunities are available throughout life, the most frequently cited problem was the lack of support provided by the state for pre-kindergarten education. That resources are even sparser for Mississippi's low-income families was also viewed as a problem. Inadequate training of preschool teachers and day care providers was another problem focused on to some degree. Each of these is a systemic problem, which was where reporting on early child development tended to focus.

Disparities

Table 15. Disparities Named * (Child Development)		
	Number of references	*% of times, overall*
Income-related	4	44%
Between Mississippi and other states	3	33%
School performance and dropout rates	2	22%

The most prevalent disparities cited in this group of articles were those based on income and poverty, since limited family income was reported to hinder access to early childhood education and skills development, both outside of and within the home. In turn, lack of skills was said to limit one's employment opportunities, which, because this is such a pervasive problem, results in Mississippi's lower per capita income. One article ("Mississippi Long-Term Economic Recovery Depends on Improving Early Education," *Mississippi Link*, January 29-February 4, 2009) was based on findings of a study that concluded that more than half of Mississippi's economic gap with the rest of the nation "is entirely due to the state's lower levels of education." The most commonly identified disparities were those that separated Mississippi from other states, based on such factors as state funding of pre-kindergarten programs, school performance, and dropout rates. Disparities based on race went unnamed in the coverage examined. Again, FrameWorks research has shown that stories about disparities that are framed in geographical terms, or disparities between "places," are more likely to advance policy thinking than those framed around disparities between groups. When approached in this manner, readers are more inclined to think about systems and fair and equitable distribution of resources.

Causes

Table 16. Causes Cited* (Child Development)		
	Number of references	*% of times, overall*
Insufficient funding and state support for pre-kindergarten programs	9	56%
Lack of appropriate training	2	13%
Practices and beliefs within the home (e.g., around reading and where learning is supposed to occur)	2	13%

Rural poverty	1	6%
No benchmarks	1	6%
Repeating grades, elementary school	1	6%

The most frequently cited cause of problems was insufficient funding and general lack of state support for pre-kindergarten programs. The other two most oft-cited causes of problems were insufficient training of teachers and providers, and practices within the home that hinder learning and development. The latter included the amount of time parents read to their children and an adherence to the idea that learning occurs at school, not in the home, ideas conveyed in "Champion for Children" (*Mississippi Business Journal*, July 27, 2009):

> 'Parents and extended family really need to understand the importance of their role as being the first connection the child is going to make,' (Cathy) Grace said. 'Everything else is built upon that….'
>
> A point of resistance to those efforts, Grace said, is the theory of some parents that anything to do with education happens in the classroom and not in the living room.
>
> 'In a lot of homes, there's no educational material, not even a book,' Grace said.

This article exemplifies the struggle over who is responsible that is subtly resolved in news narratives by a focus on individuals; in this instance, the attribution of responsibility is inadvertently laid at the hearth.

Finally, it was reported that children who do receive pre-kindergarten education are often in the hands of teachers who have not been trained in early child development. One article ("Programs Aim to Give Pre-K Pupils Even Start," *Clarion-Ledger*, April 10, 2009) made the point that "several studies show the higher a teacher's education level, the better the outcomes their students have." In this, like most of the reporting, early child education was shown to be something that must be addressed publicly, by communities, and the state at large.

Solutions

Table 17. Solutions Named * (Child Development)		
	Number of references	*% of times, overall*
Publicly funded programs/legislation	15	50%
Privately funded programs	5	17%
Scholarships/better teacher training	4	13%

Home visits, educating parents, other services	3	10%
Personal changes	2	7%
Better oversight	1	3%

Following the fact that inadequate funding was cited more regularly than any other cause of deficient early child education, most of the solutions named had to do with funding public and private programs. This was a main point of the op-ed "Investing in Early Education: The Building Blocks for Success" by Laurie Smith and Rhea Williams-Bishop. The authors listed several public remedies to problems associated with early childhood education, including improvements in training for preschool teachers and day care providers and better oversight of early childhood programs. Elsewhere, Smith described the value of providing scholarships for teachers to obtain their Child Development Associate Certificates ("Sunday Morning with Laurie Smith, Ph.D.," *Clarion-Ledger*, February 22, 2009). Less commonly identified as solutions were programs that provide services that help educate parents on how to aid their child's development within the family home. Hank Bounds ("As Child's First Teacher, Mothers Need Support from Others") identified "coaching and information to help new mothers and fathers give their young children the best possible chance to succeed." Meanwhile, "Programs Aim to Give Pre-K Pupils Even Start" described home visits provided by BabySteps and Mississippi Building Blocks "to teach parents about developmental stages and other ways to intellectually stimulate their children." The overarching message in reporting on early child development was that programs of various types, both public and private, are essential to providing Mississippi children with the foundation they need to succeed in school and in life. However, many of these same articles invited people to default to cultural assumptions about parents' lack of knowledge or concern in child rearing.

Who Benefits

The majority of coverage suggested that investment in early child development is something that benefits all Mississippi children and families, although this point was often made in a vague fashion. Seven of the stories (64%) gave at least some indication that everyone in Mississippi would benefit if all children were provided early education. Another three pieces (27%) showed that only a specific segment of the population, low-income families, would. The vast majority of coverage emphasized or at least referred to benefits for all, instead of only "those people's kids."

News Sources and Statistics

Table 18. News Sources or Messengers Quoted* (Child Development)		
	Number of individuals quoted by category	*% of times, overall*
Leaders in the field	6	35%

Education and children's advocates	5	29%
Foundation officers	2	12%
Program coordinators	1	6%
Parents	1	6%
State Superintendent of Education	1	6%
Day care director	1	6%

Experts and advocates were the major source of news in this subject area. The two most often quoted figures were Laurie Smith and Cathy Grace. No other individuals were quoted multiple times. Nearly everyone quoted had some stake in advocating for, funding, or administering programs that benefit child development at its earliest stages, including funders and foundation personnel and public education proponents. Political leaders were referred to on this topic, but not quoted, as they were on other subjects. Coverage of early child development was thin on statistics. The main fact, a very general one but oft repeated, was that most brain development occurs within the first few years of life. Specific statistical data was used to report on the consequences of not funding early child development programs. For example, the piece on mothers as a child's first teacher offered a number of statistics from the report produced by Save the Children. Those statistics revealed that families in Mississippi lag behind the rest of the country when it comes to reading to their young children, that Mississippi ranked first in terms of rural education needs, and that Mississippi ranked first in percentage of births to mothers without a high school diploma. The profile of Cathy Grace ("A Champion for Children") also featured some telling statistics, including that seven of every 10 public school fourth-graders in Mississippi cannot read at grade level, and that few children in Mississippi are taking advantage of programs such as Head Start and Early Head Start, which provide early education opportunities to low-income children and their families. Statistics were useful in illustrating that early child development is a broad social issue, one that has wide-ranging impact beyond the walls of an individual family's home. Without framing the issue as a crisis, these facts and statistics effectively made the point that early, pre-kindergarten education is vital to children's development. However, they run the risk of falling into the "Dystopic Rural Narrative" of backwardness that FrameWorks identified in its coverage of rural issues[xx].

Media Script on Early Child Development, a Summary

"Because significant brain activity occurs so early in life, it's critical that parents realize how important a role the first five years of a child's life play in determining educational success down the road." That excerpt from "Champion for Children," the profile of Dr. Cathy Grace, director of the Early Childhood Institute at Mississippi State University, stressed one of the key elements in the media script about early child development, namely that adults—including parents and elected officials—must be made aware of how much brain development occurs in the first years of life and then act accordingly.

This linked to a second prominent element of the media script about early child development, that Mississippi remains one of few states that does not fund pre-kindergarten programs. One consequence is that private funders are, by necessity, the major source of support and innovative solutions. However, the programs that they create are not capable of reaching all children statewide and may not be counted on in the long-term. As a result, people working in the field regularly stressed how important it was that support for early child education and development initiatives come from *both* private and public sources, a third component of the media script on this topic.

There were other recurring elements of the media script as well. Connections were regularly made between access to pre-kindergarten programs and success in school, which propels individuals throughout the stages of life. "Too many students are not school-ready in Mississippi" ("Mississippi Long-Term Economic Recovery Depends on Improving Early Education," *Mississippi Link*, January 29-February 4, 2009) was a frequent refrain.

Another common trope was to spotlight leaders or crusaders, or a specific program or programs that excelled in some way. While seemingly positive, this kind of "one by one by one" episodic coverage has been shown to diminish support for broad policy reforms.[xxi]

Even though media coverage of this topic was sparser than it was for the others examined, the framing was more consistent and the media script clearer. There were fewer personal anecdotes provided in stories in this subject area than any other. This meant that the focus was more likely to remain on broader issues of child development, the points being made by or about interview subjects, or the missions and goals of centers or programs being profiled. Because stories about this subject offered a clearer message and a frequently repeated set of facts and statements, the impact on readers was likely enhanced. Readers were likely to have grasped that highly significant brain development occurs in the earliest years of a child's life, and that to nurture that development requires early, pre-kindergarten education or engagement, something that large numbers of Mississippi children have not been receiving because it is not required and does not receive state funding. Furthermore, absent pre-k education, many children are far less likely to succeed in school, and this is something that has ripple effects throughout a person's life, especially in the realms of employment, income, and financial security. Taken a step further, which some of the reporting did, all of this was shown to impact the state's economy by making the state less attractive to prospective industry. Because stories were typically framed in ways that would lead readers to understand the far-reaching impacts of early childhood education, people were encouraged to conclude that pre-kindergarten programs were essential and merited support and funding, a finding consistent with the science of early child development

Health and Health Care

Storytelling Style

Table 19. Storytelling Style (Health and Health Care)		
	Number of stories	*Percent of stories*
Episodic	19	66%
Thematic	10	34%

Although anecdotes were used sparingly in only 17% of the health and health care coverage sampled, stories in this subject area, like in most others, were more apt to display characteristics associated with episodic reporting (66%) than thematic (34%). The main impact of this type of reporting was that readers would walk away from an article convinced that a problem was caused and/or could be solved by individuals. In other cases readers might have learned about a single admirable community solution, but still have little grasp of the broader context in which the problem was created or consequently why more expansive policy solutions were needed. In this instance, they might support a charity that supported the single exceptional program, but not broader public policy remedies that would normalize these issues.

For example, "Are You One of South Mississippi's Big Losers?" (*Biloxi Sun Herald*, January 10, 2010) was emblematic of a story with an episodic leaning because it focused on individual behaviors as both the cause of and solution to a health problem. While the article opened with a set of statistics that frame obesity as an "epidemic," obesity was attributed primarily to personal behaviors and culture, although genetics and environment were mentioned. The executive director of Gulf Coast Health Educators was quoted:

> 'In the South we love fried, high-fat, high-sugar foods and too much of it.
>
> Because of the summer heat, we're often less active, and in the past people used to get more exercise at work. Now they're mostly sedentary desk jobs.'

The declining amount of physical activity among school children, and vast amounts of time that children spend in front of computers and television, were also cited as causes. Because individual choice was said to be the cause of obesity, the solutions identified were personal. Given the narrowness of this narrative constructive, there is literally no place else to turn; fingers were pointed strictly at Mississippians who chose to eat unhealthy foods, or to not get up out of their chairs or sofas and exercise. The reporter wrote:

> The state's obesity figures cannot be turned around overnight. No government-funded program, no magic pill or exercise exists for guaranteed weight loss. Personal commitment and lifestyle changes are proven ingredients to a healthier lifestyle.

The problem with the episodic-leaning articles is that they lead readers to think primarily about "personal responsibility," and not social responsibility. They also lack systemic explanations, such as limited access to healthy, affordable foods that play a crucial role in

people's health. When the public's thinking remains at the level of the individual, it becomes less likely that people will imagine community and policy solutions to what are oftentimes far-reaching social problems. This is a topic on which extensive FrameWorks research exists, explaining the effects of these media narratives on public thinking.[xxii]

Other reporting displayed a mix of thematic and episodic elements, although that approach can prove problematic as well. For example, "Uninsured Health-Care Ranks Rise" (*Clarion-Ledger*, July 2, 2009) opened with a prominently placed and fairly substantial anecdote, this one about a 30-year-old diabetic, who had stopped visiting a physician because of cost:

> In a state the federal government already ranks weak in health care, Mississippians are losing health insurance and choosing to either forgo treatment or join the uninsured filling waiting rooms at subsidized clinics and emergency rooms.

> Renee Payne is one of those. The 30-year-old diabetic from Terry is among the 18 percent who have decided against visiting a physician because of the cost.

This mix of episodic and thematic elements here poses a framing problem because of the order of the narrative. Once exposed to the vivid case example, research strongly suggests that people are unlikely to keep policy solutions top of mind.[xxiii] Despite the focus on one woman's choices, the article did provide an opening for the reporter to address some of the problems with the current health system and the need for far-reaching reforms. In other words, it proceeded to show some of the issue's wider dimensions:

> Over the past three years, the Jackson-Hinds Comprehensive Health Center has seen its number of uninsured patients rise from 40 percent to 56 percent.

> 'We need a permanent solution based on the premise that all people, whether poor or old or living in Mississippi, deserve access to health care,' said Dr. Jasmin Chapman, CEO of the center. 'You can't have a healthy economy if you don't have healthy people.'

> Mississippi's perpetual problems with funding Medicaid could toss even more people into the ranks of the uninsured, she said.

Still, within this subsample, there were stronger examples of thematic reporting. "Uninsured Carry a Heavy Burden" (*Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal*, November 16, 2009) was one of the more thematic pieces examined. It exposed an ongoing problem that was said to affect not just uninsured individuals and their families, but everyone:

> The costs of being without health insurance go beyond dollars and individual families.

When the uninsured seek medical care, they arrive with more serious health problems and more advanced diseases, said Dr. Mike O'Dell, chief quality officer for North Mississippi Health Services and president of the Mississippi Academy of Family Physicians.

'The care they need is more expensive and they are less likely to be able to afford it,' O'Dell said.

For those lacking insurance coverage, the emergency room was said to become the primary care source. The consequences of operating in this manner were shown to be widespread: loss of work and income for those who become disabled, loss of productivity for employers, increased debt for health care providers, and costs passed on to taxpayers. In 2009 charity care at North Mississippi Health Services was said to have been around $70 million. The primary solution advanced by this article was national health care reform. The reporter concluded:

Money spent on health care helps the person, but those dollars also turn over several times in the local economy. 'There's no better way to spend money in our economy,' (Roy) Mitchell (executive director of the Mississippi Health Advocacy Program) said.

Reporting of this kind helps readers to see how the problems being addressed are societal, not strictly individual. It leads them to comprehend how arriving at policy solutions benefits all residents of the state and to consider the positive aspects of investing in solutions in a more comprehensive way. Unfortunately, the majority of reporting in Mississippi newspapers about health care was primarily episodic in nature. Additionally, most took a dystopic view of the problem with few visioning values that allowed people to see what a healthy Mississippi might look like and how that would propel the state forward.

Focus

Table 20. Focus of Stories on Health and Health Care		
	Number of stories	*Percent of stories*
Reform	5	17%
Obesity	4	14%
African American health issues and disparities specific to that population	3	10%
Specific community-based projects	3	10%
Uninsured residents, including emergency care	3	10%
Health care disparities and issues of access	2	7%

Rising insurance premiums	2	7%
Medical professional shortage	1	3%
State's health statistics, rankings	1	3%
Diabetes	1	3%
Proposed hospital tax	1	3%
Women's health issues	1	3%
Community health checkups	1	3%
Oral health	1	3%

Of those stories selected for review, 62% dealt with access to adequate health care and related issues. The other 38% focused on specific health problems, such as obesity, heart disease, and diabetes that affect large numbers of Mississippi residents. Stories about the delivery of health care focused on problems like the shortage of primary care physicians around the state, especially in more rural areas, problems hospitals face due to high rates of unemployment in a weak economy, the effects of rising premium costs on the insured, and the growing number of residents who are uninsured. Disparities in care that impact specific populations, most notably Delta county residents and African American residents, were a focus of some stories. Other articles highlighted solutions, such as a partnership formed to help provide accessible, quality health care in the Delta counties. Media effects research shows that readers respond more positively to stories that do not focus strictly on problems and disparities, but connect practical solutions to problem definition. That is, while solutions are important, they must be connected to a clear and coherent problem explanation.

Articles that addressed a specific health condition, such as obesity, were most likely to focus on the need to educate the public about the severe consequences of allowing the condition to go untreated. This led reporters to emphasize the importance of changes in individual behaviors, but also prevention, especially when framed to drive home the point that the cost of prevention is a fraction of the expense incurred if a health problem goes untreated for an extended period of time.

In some stories, the focus was on health problems as they affect only one segment of the population, African Americans. Stories that took that approach risked triggering a widely held belief that black Americans and white Americans have separate, not shared, fates. This reinforces the idea for many readers that the problem being described only impacts "those people," not the entire population and shrinks the constituency for reform.

Disparities

Table 21. Disparities Named * (Health and Health Care)		
	Number of references	*% of times, overall*

Regional	16	46%
Socioeconomic	8	23%
Racial	6	17%
Gender	4	11%
Between insured and uninsured	1	3%

Like other issue areas, the coverage on health care was primarily focused on regional disparities within the state. "Will the Doctor Be In?" (*Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal*, October 5, 2009) cited research by Mississippi State University's Social Science Research Center that showed that almost all of northeast Mississippi had a significant undersupply of primary care physicians, something that will only grow with mandated insurance. Much of the article was devoted to possible solutions to this problem:

> Part of the equation is getting more medical students interested in what primary care has to offer and better preparing students from rural areas so they can pursue medical careers.

Although limited, there was some coverage on income, race and gender-based disparities. For example, "Sunday Morning with Dr. Marinelle Payton" (*Clarion-Ledger*, October 4, 2009), an interview, allowed the assistant dean of the School of Health Sciences at Jackson State University to discuss a number of types of disparities, and to talk about their root causes and possible solutions. This was the most fully-developed discussion of disparities and featured a definition:

> Health disparities, also called health care inequality, refer to gaps in the quality of health and health care access across socioeconomic, racial, ethnic and gender groups, a population-specific difference in the presence of disease, health outcomes, or access to health care. The problem is that despite improvements in the overall access to health of American people, certain populations suffer a higher burden of illness and chronic diseases such as heart disease, cancer, HIV/AIDS, and infant mortality and premature death.

Payton traced many of the causes of poor health and health disparities in the state to poverty, which impacts diet and opportunities for exercise. In doing this, she helped readers to see that there are social dimensions to health problems:

> With the cost of food increasing, these days, the cost of healthy eating is also increasing; with decreased built environment—for walking, exercising, etc.; physical activity also decreases. It would be superlative of me to say that poverty plays a major role in a healthy lifestyle. Mississippi weighs in as the fattest state and also weighs in as one of the most impoverished states. Studies show that the underserved in Mississippi receive inadequate education, have limited access to quality health care and experience individual and environmental risks that could result in the lack of healthy eating and physical activity.

The one article that dealt with racial disparities most directly and from a broad historical perspective was "Opening of Medical 'Maafa' Museum Warns of the Crisis of Black Genocide," published in the *Jackson Advocate*:

> The legacy of racism and discrimination in health care, especially to African Americans in the Mississippi Delta, the country's poorest geographic region, extends back to the era of enslavement and Jim Crow.

Similarly, only two articles focused on *gender*-related disparities. "It's Time to Deliver: Women and Health Care" (*Mississippi Link*, October 29-November 4, 2009) emphasized the high percentage of women in Mississippi who had not had screenings in the past three years. This was said to be due to a lack of access to affordable health care, which one source, the president of the Mississippi Federation for Democratic Women, said impacts women in particular. "Are there disparities between the sexes when it comes to health care? 'A 25-year-old woman is charged more than a 25-year-old man for the same coverage,' (Mary Katherine) Brown argued." Meanwhile, "Health Insurance for Individuals Does Need Fixing" (*Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal*, November 15, 2009) illustrated ways that women are on the losing end when buying individual health insurance. "The need for more health care services works against women seeking individual policies. By law, in most states insurance companies can charge a woman a much higher premium than a man of the same age." As with coverage that emphasized racial disparities, these articles about gender disparities could be viewed as reporting on separate, as opposed to shared, fates with similar consequences.

Previous FrameWorks research has shown the effectiveness of communicating place-based disparities. This kind of reporting might be effective in dislodging public thinking about disparities from the domain of individual responsibility and encourage more systemic explanations and solutions to addressing disparities. Since this is already a theme in Mississippi coverage, there may be an opening to organize thinking around this theme.

Causes

Table 22. Causes Cited* (Health and Health Care)		
	Number of references	*% of times, overall*
Systemic, includes lack of accessible, affordable care and disparities of care and prevention	13	32.5%
Poverty, unemployment	6	15%
Personal habits, includes lifestyle choices, such as inactivity and diet	6	15%
Lack of oversight of insurance companies, soaring cost of premiums	3	7.5%
Insufficient public funding of programs	3	7.5%
Lack of health insurance	2	5%

Southern culture	2	5%
Political ideology leading to divisiveness over reform	2	5%
Climate	1	2.5%
Transportation	1	2.5%
Institutional racism	1	2.5%

Problems associated with access to care were said to be caused by numerous systemic factors. One was a shortage of primary care physicians, attributed to low reimbursement rates that limit incentive for doctors to locate in underserved areas, combined with a lack of desire on the part of many physicians to serve rural populations. Another was unemployment, caused by a poor national and state economy, and leading residents to forgo insurance and hence care, unless or until there was a medical emergency. A third was a shortage of funding. "There's not enough public funding from state and federal sources, so we're looking to private sources," said Ray Humphreys, CEO and president of the Delta Regional Medical Center ("New Foundation Trying to Improve Healthcare," *Mississippi Business Journal*, October 26, 2009). A fourth was the lack of oversight of health insurance companies and the increased cost of premiums, both of which have led people to decide they must opt out of insurance. Cultural, linguistic, and transportation barriers were other reasons cited for certain populations not seeking or receiving needed care. Each of these explanations helped push conversations about health and health care in a direction that could help the public see the necessity of public policy.

When it came to the causes of poor health, explanations varied. For example, behaviors starting in childhood were often identified as a cause of obesity. It was rare for readers to be exposed to other causes. One article that looked at causes other than strictly personal ones was "Obesity is Still a Problem in State" (*Mississippi Press*, July 2, 2009). Here the state epidemiologist was quoted, saying that while recently enacted laws included a requirement that public school students have 150 minutes of physical activity a week and healthier school menu options, the state provided no funding for educating the public about specific issues such as obesity prevention. It is noteworthy that causes in this article existed within a social, political, and systemic framework. The notion of educating the public about prevention, when conjoined with discussions about funding programs, takes these subjects outside of the strictly personal realm.

Solutions

Table 23. Solutions Named * (Health and Health Care)		
	Number of references	*% of times, overall*
Health care reform	8	18%
Programs, includes outreach and education	8	18%
Changes in personal behavior or lifestyle	7	16%

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Legislation at the state level	5	11%
Access to screenings and preventative care	3	7%
Scholarships and other enticements to get young residents to enter medical professionals and practice in the state	3	7%
Dialogue, summits	3	7%
Research	2	5%
More African American doctors	1	2%
New technologies	1	2%
Additional school nurses statewide	1	2%
Nurse practitioners to fill void due to doctor shortage	1	2%
Improved settings for physical activity	1	2%

As with causes, changes in personal behavior, as well as outreach and educational programs, were the most frequently cited solutions. This extended to problems like obesity that were attributed largely to an individual's choices. Still, obesity was the one area where making better personal choices was most likely to be included among the solutions being proposed. More frequently, reporting concentrated on social and community-based solutions coming from public and private sources. Privately funded programs were depicted as crucial, given the limited number of funds available at the state level. Meanwhile, four articles emphasized that national health care reform was likely the most fruitful solution.

Who Benefits

Reporting on this subject was more likely than reporting on race, education, or children's health and development issues, to suggest that only certain populations would benefit from problems being solved, not the entire population of the state. Nearly 45% of the coverage suggested that solving the problems identified would help only some residents of the state, while 31% conveyed the idea that it would help all. In the remaining 24% it was unclear who would be helped. When health and health care coverage identified problems as affecting only certain segments of the population, the result could be that the broader public will dismiss the stories as being about "other people's problems."

News Sources and Statistics

Table 24 News Sources or Messengers Quoted* (Health and Health Care)		
	Number of individuals quoted by category	*% of times, overall*
Educators	11	17%
Hospital officials	7	11%

Doctors and other health professionals	6	9%
Advocacy organization leaders	6	9%
Medical association spokespeople	5	8%
Foundation and related spokespeople	4	6%
Recipients of medical care	4	6%
Other citizens	4	6%
State legislators	2	3%
State epidemiologist	2	3%
State health workers	2	3%
Small business owners	2	3%
Health care providers and misc. others (includes entertainers, Commissioner of Higher Education, insurers, teacher, minister, medical researcher)	9	14%

On the topic of health and health care, FrameWorks research has shown that the public considers some news messengers to be trustworthy and knowledgeable, and others not.[xxiv] According to these findings, two categories of sources, ordinary people and physicians, are the most credible. Each was fairly well represented in the news reporting on this issue. The largest number of news sources quoted in health and health care stories were people who worked in various medical professions. Educators were the next most frequently cited.

Statistics were of two main types, those that dealt with the number of uninsured Mississippians and those that illustrated the number of Mississippians who suffer from specific health conditions, the main ones being obesity and diabetes. Statistics that played up comparisons with other states often did so to show that Mississippi is in a state of crisis or experiencing an epidemic. This narrative choice could make the issue appear unsolvable because of the magnitude and pervasiveness. Potentially more helpful were statistics on health care that helped illustrate the social dimensions of problems surrounding how health care is delivered, especially if paired with potential solutions.

Media Script on Health and Health Care, a Summary

The "dead last" storyline was especially prominent in newspaper coverage about health and health care. A key element of the media script on health was that the state continues to lead the nation when it comes to obesity and that many health issues, including high blood pressure and diabetes, are linked to that condition. Framing the story of health in those terms, particularly when words like "crisis" and "epidemic" are applied, or when there is a consistent pattern of repeating phrases like "dead last," has been shown to have an adverse effect on the public. The problem may appear so overwhelming that it is unsolvable. Stories about obesity in particular were more likely than stories about other

problems to hold individuals responsible for their condition, based on their choices and behaviors. This "health individualism" grows out of a belief that each person creates his or her own destiny, that it is a matter of personal responsibility to make healthy choices regarding diet and exercise.[xxv] This pattern of thinking has been shown to shut out the notion of a shared or linked fate, preventing the problem from becoming part of the public conversation, in turn limiting the range of solutions that the public is likely to be open to considering. Rarely were more systemic explanations for poor health a part of the media conversation. For example, limited access to affordable, healthy foods, a systemic cause, with political and economic dimensions, was conspicuously absent from most of the coverage.

The media script on health care, by contrast, was more likely to focus on systemic issues. A key message of the coverage was that the current system does not provide equitable, quality health care to Mississippi residents. One point almost entirely absent in the media script on health and health care was made by "Helping Treat the Delta's Ailments" (*Mississippi Business Journal*, June 22, 2009):

> If the 18 Delta counties (excluding Desoto County) were removed from the state's numbers, Mississippi would rank average or near average in almost all major health indicators."

That this point was not a part of the script, illustrates how media coverage during the period covered generally lumped the whole population of Mississippi together. This was evident, too, when it came to racial disparities, which were also infrequently mentioned. One potentially positive result was that Mississippians might be more inclined to think about problems associated with the delivery of health care in terms of a shared, not separate, fate. Conversely, however, the locus of problems and realistic, targeted solutions are not made visible by this narrative. Solutions to problems in this area centered on a mix of community programs and federal legislation. Community health fairs that offer education and testing, and which stress prevention, were depicted as positive solutions. More far-reaching measures, especially national health care reform, were reported to be much more controversial.

Children's Health and Well-Being

Storytelling Style

Table 25. Storytelling Style (Children's Health and Well-Being)		
	Number of stories	*Percent of stories*
Episodic	13	59%
Thematic	9	41%

Of the five subject areas, this was the only one in which the majority of stories (55%) featured anecdotes, and, as in most other categories, coverage of children's health and

well-being was largely episodic. Nearly 60% of the stories approached their subject episodically.

"Unlicensed Day Cares May be Hard to Regulate" (*Biloxi Sun Herald*, December 6, 2009) was emblematic of how media personalized issues having to do with children's health and well-being. It opened with a pressing issue:

> The state has stiff regulations for day cares it licenses—inspections once or twice a year, training; background checks and a list of requirements and guidelines that includes nine steps to washing hands and a page and a half on the best way to change a diaper.

> But there is a type of day care that is unregulated.

> It's the home day care, allowed by law as long as the owner keeps no more than five children, not including their own or relatives. For them, there are no visits by the state, no license and no requirements.

While this opening segment dealt with broad themes and made important connections for readers, it quickly shifted focus to the stories of parents who had run into problems when they placed their children in unlicensed facilities. The burden of change was largely placed upon parents to be more careful about where they place their children. The closing line, a quote from a state health department spokeswoman, was:

> 'It is imperative that parents assure that a center is licensed in accordance with state law and regulations prior to placing their child in the center.'

Here, readers were presented a private solution to what in actuality is a broad social issue.

By contrast, "Kids' Health Care," an editorial in support of funding the CHIP program, published by the *Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal* (January 18, 2009), was largely thematic. It stressed the significance of coverage for all and connected health to success in life:

> Health insurance coverage for about four million additional children not covered by Medicaid last week passed the U.S. House by a large, bi-partisan margin—a significant, beneficial step toward the rearing of healthier kids in every state, providing them the basic physical and mental building blocks for lifelong success.

The editorial went on to call CHIP "an investment in human capital, the health-care corollary to government programs offering education, work force training and private sector-driven economic development." The implications were wide:

> Healthy people entering the work force have a measurably higher chance of succeeding in jobs they seek, in advancing in their careers, and in longevity on the job. Their personal health-care costs usually are lower if childhood health extends

through life. An investment in good health care…provides knowledge to make right choices for a lifetime.

The editorial underscored the importance of elected officials putting politics aside and acknowledging the value of universal health care coverage for children. This is an example of framing that helps the public to think about children's issues in terms of opportunity and the future, themes that are shown to best engage the public in conversation about policies. It demonstrates that government plays a positive role in people's lives and that reform helps everyone.[xxvi]

Story Placement

As with other subjects, children's health and well-being was mainly covered in the two principal news sections, front and state and regional pages. The other most frequent locations were the editorial and opinion pages.

Focus

Table 26 Focus of Stories on Children's Health and Well-Being		
	Number of stories	*Percent of stories*
Mississippi children's well-being	6	30%
Obesity	3	15%
School programs	3	15%
Children's health	2	10%
Federal legislation	2	10%
Infant mortality and related issues	2	10%
Community program	1	5%
Physical activity	1	5%

Because schools are a central environment in children's lives, schools as the sites of problems and schools as potential sources of solutions were often the focus of articles. FrameWorks' research on children's health has revealed that schools are often framed as the *only* place where students' dietary choices can be effectively regulated and monitored. This may narrow the opportunity to involve a broader array of community actors to confront the systemic causes of poor child nutrition and insufficient physical exercise. On the other hand, because the public trusts schools to play a role in making children healthier, they are reminded that government truly does contribute positively to people's lives and well-being.[xxvii]

In Mississippi newspapers, changes in school lunch programs, the move to eliminate junk food from schools, and a push to increase physical education were common subjects, as

were specific programs designed to address children's health needs. Less frequent, but also a focus of some coverage, was day care, reportedly a problem in a state where lower-income people often rely on home day care, something that the state does not license or regulate in any way.

Some coverage took a broader approach to children's health and well-being issues. In those cases, stories cited a number of areas in which vital needs were not being met. "Mississippi Is Once Again Failing Its Children," the *Mississippi Link* opinion piece, was based on the Children's Defense Fund's "State of America's Children" 2008 report. It noted a number of reasons that Mississippi ranks last among states when it comes to children's health and well-being: poverty, racism, uninsured children, infant mortality, low-birth babies, maternal deaths, teen pregnancy, plus an increasing number of children receiving food stamps, and low enrollment in Early Head Start programs. Other stories were based on the findings of the 20th annual KidsCount survey released by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Each of those pieces concluded that solutions will come in the form of investment, although one editorial made a point of blaming adults, "who apparently take no thought of the consequences for children," for "personal and familial irresponsibility."

Disparities

Table 27. Disparities Named * (Children's Health and Well-Being)		
	Number of references	*% of times, overall*
Income-related	10	44%
State vs. the rest of the nation	8	35%
Race	5	22%

Income or socioeconomic class was the most frequently cited disparity. Disparities between Mississippi and the rest of the nation also came up with some frequency, while racial disparities were less often cited. The article reporting on the Children's Defense Fund's "State of America's Children" 2008 study made the most direct link between race and income or poverty level. The op-ed "Health Offensives" noted that obesity is a problem of particular intensity among African Americans in Mississippi, as did the article "2nd Mississippi Site Funded to Fight Obesity" (*Clarion-Ledger*, January 14, 2010).

Causes

Table 28. Causes Cited* (Children's Health and Well-Being)		
	Number of references	*% of times, overall*
Individual behaviors, attitudes	9	39%
Lack of investment	4	17%
Economy	3	13%

Unclear	2	9%
Ideology and politics	2	9%
Failings of schools (diet, exercise)	1	4%
Lack of regulation	1	4%
Limited access to healthy foods and environments that support physical activity	1	4%

Indicative of the more episodic quality of reporting on children's health and well-being were the number of times that individual behaviors and attitudes were cited as causes of problems in this subject area. Nearly half of the stories personalized problems. Overeating and insufficient exercise were often highlighted as causes of the problems. Personal and familial irresponsibility were emphasized in "Mississippi's Kids," with the blame placed on "adults, women and men, who apparently take no thought of the consequences (of their irresponsibility) for children." Various political and economic factors entered the picture as causes in other stories. Those included underinvestment in education and health care; the effects of unemployment, the recession, and regional poverty; limited access to healthy foods and environments that support physical activity; low reimbursement rates for doctors who treat children on Medicaid; and ideology and politics trumping the health and well-being of the state's children. This latter approach was more likely to push the public conversation forward, to get the public thinking and talking about ways of addressing children's issues in a manner that involved systems and policy.

Solutions

Table 29. Solutions Named * (Children's Health and Well-Being)		
	Number of references	*% of times, overall*
Programs	11	34%
Government investment	7	22%
Change in schools operations	5	16%
Personal responsibility, changes in personal habits	4	13%
Health centers, comprehensive care for all	2	6%
Faith-based organizations speaking up	1	3%
Training school nurses	1	3%
Dialogue	1	3%

While the causes of problems were often attributed to personal failings, solutions described most frequently came in the form of changes in how schools operate, the

implementation of new programs, or government investment. Better training of school nurses to enlist them in the campaign against childhood obesity was the topic of one article, "Schools Helping Children Fight Fat" (*Clarion-Ledger*, August 10, 2009). Other more widely reported actions included vending machine bans, more healthy food options for school lunches, and increased physical activity during the school week, the result of grants for physical education equipment and more mandated time. These changes were frequently attributed to the 2007 Mississippi Healthy Students Act, legislation that outlined health and wellness standards for public schools. Combined, these also shed light on government's positive role through schools.

Focusing so much on school-based solutions meant that newspapers were often overlooking other sources that might or were helping to solve children's health and well-being issues, although some stories did credit particular community programs for their role in solving children's problems. "Programs Share 'Successes' for Kids" (*Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal*, February 26, 2009) reported on four programs that were designed to meet children's medical, social, and educational needs. "Mississippi's Kids" (*Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal*, February 27, 2009) cited the need for programs like CATCH Kids, designed to provide health care for children whose parents have a difficult time getting them to medical appointments. "2nd Mississippi Site Funded to Fight Obesity" (January 14, 2010) told of a number of programs and initiatives funded from grants from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. One initiative, Jump Start Jackson, is designed to attract more fresh grocers to the city and help local farmers markets provide low-income families with better access to healthy foods. This coverage illustrated that the range of public solutions to children's issues extends beyond the walls of the schoolhouse.

News Sources and Statistics

Table 30. News Sources or Messengers Quoted* (Children's Health and Well-Being)		
	Number of individuals quoted by category	*% of times, overall*
School nurses, nutritionists, food services	6	12%
Parents and grandparents	5	10%
Government officials or spokespersons	5	10%
Mississippi Kids Count director and data book	4	8%
State health officials	4	8%
Nonprofit and foundation leaders	4	8%
Program coordinator, managers	3	6%
Professors	3	6%
Day care operators	2	4%

Youth coordinators	2	4%
Doctors	2	4%
School principals	2	4%
Teachers	1	2%
Congressperson	1	2%
Catholic sisters	1	2%
Students	1	2%
Research analyst	1	2%
Children's advocate	1	2%
Pediatric dentist	1	2%

People working in various health professions, including school nurses and nutritionists, physicians and state health officials, were the most frequently quoted sources in stories about children's health and well-being. Prior FrameWorks research has revealed that school nurses and nutritionists are likely to be among the most trusted sources when it comes to addressing children's health needs. Statistics were fairly evenly divided between those used to illustrate the poor overall state of children's health in Mississippi and those reporting on children's well-being. In the first category were figures on such matters as obesity and birth weights. In the second category were figures on childhood poverty, Medicaid use, and teen pregnancies.

Media Script on Children's Health and Well-Being, a Summary

The headline "Mississippi is Once Again Failing Its Children" (*Mississippi Link*, February 5-11, 2009) captured one of the key elements of the media script on children's health and well-being. Like many of the stories examined in this subject area, it reinforced the "dead last" theme that permeated much of the newspaper coverage about Mississippi. An editorial in the *Clarion-Ledger* (August 2, 2009) summed up the situation this way: "When it comes to child well-being, Mississippi doesn't measure up. In fact we're last again." Readers exposed to a steady stream of crisis reporting could become overwhelmed and be led to thinking that the problems described were unsolvable.

Some of the other factors reported to have a strong bearing on children's well-being included poverty, inadequate parenting, and unregulated day care. Reporting on those issues was often framed in ways that played up children as "vulnerable victims" or which might lead readers to think that the fates of different social groups were not linked. As we have seen, both are problematic approaches to social problems. Framing that portrays individuals as vulnerable victims tends to evoke sympathy on the part of readers, but restricts their thinking to that individual, leading them to see the person's story in isolation from its social context. Reporting that suggests separate fates diminishes the likelihood that readers will connect the problem being reported on to their own lives.

Childhood obesity was of repeated concern, along with a series of related problems—unhealthy diets, easy access to junk food, no healthy alternatives, and limited physical activity. In the dominant media script, schools were regularly identified as the best vestige of hope and major source of solutions for children's health problems. FrameWorks research shows that when people are reminded of the role schools play in promoting children's health, it triggers the notion that government plays a role in these outcomes. On the other hand, a narrow focus on schools can prevent the public from entertaining other sources of action and change.

Conclusion

Mississippi newspapers during the period covered did not shy away from acknowledging that the state fares poorly when it comes to residents' education, health, and financial well-being. As for solving pressing social problems in each of these areas, much of the coverage, and many of the news sources quoted, observed that elected officials at the state level should be leading the charge to improve conditions, but that they were unable or unlikely to do so for budgetary and/or political reasons. With a significant revenue shortfall and a poor national and state economy, the governor was frequently featured in stories as an advocate of cuts, not increases, in vital social, health, and education programs and services. Those cuts were proposed on top of historically low spending at the state level on social programs. In some cases the governor and members of the state legislature were taken to task for playing politics with people's lives or for being too rigid ideologically. Consequently, as crucial as any number of public policy initiatives were for the long-term security of the state's economy and Mississippi residents, the prospects of publicly funded programs becoming the primary solution to social problems was deemed highly unlikely. This meant that reporting on solutions to the state's most pressing issues focused mostly on initiatives coming from a variety of private sources, foundations, nonprofits, and community organizations, or schools and churches. Less frequently, individuals were called upon to alter their behaviors, although this was more often named as a solution to some forms of problems than others. Solutions of that kind were more likely to appear in reporting on obesity and easing racial tensions. Meanwhile, the African American press often focused on solutions originating within the black community, not through legislation or public policy.

A major interest of this study has been to discern whether Mississippians are likely to walk away from newspaper coverage with an enhanced or constrained understanding of the issues that face the state and their potential for solution. We set out to discern whether readers were being offered sufficient context to appreciate the systemic underpinnings of problems confronting the state's residents, and whether newspaper coverage was prompting them to see the value of dialogue, community partnerships, and public policy solutions that demand public investment. As we have seen, news coverage and opinion pieces that convey the idea that individual behaviors and attitudes—not social structures or institutions—are asserted as the primary causes of social problems in Mississippi, reinforcing a dominant ideology in the United States, one that individualizes social problems. When race is added to the mix, as for example when the socioeconomic

conditions of lower-income black families are attributed to pathologies (a form of personal flaw, another way of individualizing social problems), that, too feeds into a dominant frame that Americans carry with them. Generalizations are often made about the socioeconomic circumstances of a segment of the population and then attributed to flawed behaviors, values, "lifestyles," or ways of thinking, instead of social structures, systems, and institutions.

Because, as we have also seen, news coverage is most often episodic, focusing on the circumstances of a specific individual or family, a discrete event, or a solution being applied in a single location, the public is unlikely to grasp the full context and therefore the complexity of the situation being described, especially if it appears that the problem mainly impacts a social group that the reader does not identify with. In addition, because newspaper coverage so often focuses on an immediate event or solution, it is unlikely that readers will come to appreciate and understand the deep, historical roots of a reported problem. Absent needed context, the onus of change is again placed on individuals or specific social groups. When individuals or specific groups are seen to be at fault, society at large is absolved of responsibility for solving longstanding problems through social policies. Often minority groups, because they are the ones identified with social problems, are the ones who are called upon to change their behaviors or ways of thinking, something that can spur anger or mistrust.

The mainstream press captures some of the mistrust that the public as a whole has for government, particularly when it comes to adult health care, not so much when it involves children's care through the schools. In the black-owned press, there is a mistrust of solutions that originate in mainstream legislative and policy channels. This sharp contrast in perceptions and experiences offers yet another clue to some of the acrimony that persists in Mississippi.

Finally, either directly or indirectly, much of the media coverage examined conveyed the idea that Mississippi has transcended its racial past, a recurring theme in mainstream news stories, editorials, and op-ed pieces. Segregated schools, for example, were most often treated as something that existed in the past. An act of racial bigotry, such as vandalism to an historical marker, was depicted as aberrant behavior on the part of an individual, not something that is more pervasive through society. By contrast, the African American press, as evident in multiple *Mississippi Link* and *Jackson Advocate* pieces, emphasized the many ways that systemic racism leads to sharp disparities and continues to place restrictions on the range of possibilities for Mississippi's black residents, resulting in different forms of solutions being proposed.

Appendix

Table A. Stories on Race by Publication

Name of Publication	Number of stories	Percent of stories
Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal, Tupelo	8	25%
Clarion-Ledger, Jackson	6	19%
Mississippi Link, Jackson	5	16%
Hattiesburg American	5	16%
Biloxi Sun Herald	3	9%
Natchez Democrat	2	6%
Mississippi Business Journal	1	3%
Mississippi Press	1	3%
Jackson Advertiser	1	3%

Table B. Placement of Stories on Race		
Section	**Number of stories**	**Percent of stories**
Opinion	11	34%
State and Regional (Metro or Community)	8	25%
News, Main or A Section	7	22%
Lifestyle or Entertainment	5	16%
Business	1	3%

Table C. Problems (Race)		
	Number of stories	**Percent of stories**
Black inequality/incomes/education/jobs/ other disparities	8	25%
Personal prejudice, mainly from whites	6	19%
Challenges of discussing race and race relations	5	16%
Tensions between immigrants and other workers	4	13%
Segregation, historical	3	9%
Conflicts over legislation and policy	2	6%
Lack of unity among Black Americans/institutional racism	1	3%
Black irresponsibility/family	1	3%
Historical omissions	1	3%
Racial balance in public life	1	3%

Table D. Statistics Cited on Race		
	Number of references	*Overall percentage*
Income figures	3	12%
Poverty rate	3	12%
Black population of specific states and Washington, DC	2	8%
High school graduation rate	2	8%
Lifespan	2	8%
Uninsured Americans	1	4%
Unemployment figures	1	4%
Infant mortality	1	4%
Black college enrollment	1	4%
College degree rate	1	4%
Interracial marriage	1	4%
Professional athletes	1	4%
Immigrant arrests	1	4%
Immigrant employment	1	4%
Immigrant population figures	1	4%
Hunger and race	1	4%
Black trustees in Mississippi compared with national average	1	4%

Table E. Stories on Education by Publication		
Name of Publication	*Number of stories*	*Percent of stories*
Clarion-Ledger	9	26%
Hattiesburg American	9	26%
Biloxi Sun Herald	6	18%
Mississippi Link	3	9%
Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal	3	9%
Laurel Leader-Call	2	6%
Mississippi Business Journal	2	6%

Table F. Placement of Stories on Education		
Section	*Number of stories*	*Percent of stories*
News, Main or A Section	12	35%
Editorial and Op-ed Pages	12	35%
State and Regional	5	15%
Business	2	6%
Other	2	6%
Education	1	3%

Table G. Problems (Education)		
	Number of stories	*Percent of stories*
State budget cuts' impact on school districts and colleges and universities	10	29%
Restrictive information due to abstinence only sex education, leading to teen pregnancies and STDs	7	20%
Low educational attainment statewide weakens the economy	4	12%
Disparities in school performance by county and wealth	3	9%
Low test scores on mandated exams	3	9%
Insufficient teacher training and cultural divide between students and teachers	2	6%
Meeting the needs of non-traditional adult students	1	3%
Resegregation of schools	1	3%
Teaching English to student bodies with multiple languages	1	3%
High rate of corporal punishment in Mississippi schools	1	3%
Lowering school standards	1	3%

Table H. Statistics Cited (Education)*		
	Number of references	*Overall percentage*
High school graduation rates	7	20%
Teen birth rates	7	20%
Income levels	4	11%
Test performance	3	9%
Student race and class demographics	3	9%

STD rates	3	9%
Regional rankings, Northeast Mississippi	2	6%
Corporal punishment	1	3%
Student recipients of state services	1	3%
Languages other than English spoken in home	1	3%
Citizen status and country of origin	1	3%
State unemployment rate	1	3%
Achievement levels based on race and gender	1	3%

Table I. Stories on Early Child Development by Publication		
Name of Publication	*Number of stories*	*Percent of stories*
Clarion-Ledger, Jackson	4	36%
Mississippi Link, Jackson	3	27%
Hattiesburg American	2	18%
Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal, Tupelo	1	9%
Mississippi Business Journal	1	9%

Table J. Placement of Stories on Early Child Development		
Section	*Number of stories*	*Percent of stories*
News, Main or A Section	3	27%
Opinion/Editorial	3	27%
State and Regional (Metro or Community)	2	18%
Education	1	9%
Business	1	9%
Other/Not Sure	1	9%

Table K. Problems (Child Development)		
	Number of stories	*Percent of stories*
Lack of resources, esp. funding for pre-kindergarten education	5	45%
Educational success is tied to access to preschool programs, which are in short supply, esp. for low-income families	3	27%
Insufficient training	2	18%

Mothers' needs are going unmet	1	9%

Table L. Facts and Statistics Cited* (Child Development)		
	Number of references	*Overall percentage*
Brain development	4	21%
Performance in school, based on reading levels, test performance, repeated grades	3	16%
Pre-kindergarten funding	2	11%
High school graduation rate, statewide	2	11%
Median state income and adult poverty rate	2	11%
Parents who read to their children	1	5%
Single-parent households	1	5%
Rural education rate	1	5%
Teen birth rate	1	5%
States where children face most obstacles	1	5%
Use of Head Start and other programs for young children	1	5%

Table M. Stories on Health and Health Care by Publication		
Name of Publication	*Number of stories*	*Percent of stories*
Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal, Tupelo	8	28%
Clarion-Ledger, Jackson	7	24%
Mississippi Link, Jackson	4	14%
Mississippi Business Journal, Jackson	4	14%
Biloxi Sun Herald	2	7%
Mississippi Press	2	7%
Hattiesburg American	1	3%
Jackson Advertiser	1	3%

Table N. Placement of Stories on Health and Health Care		
Section	*Number of stories*	*Percent of stories*
News, Main or A Section	8	28%
State and Regional	5	17%

Editorial/op-ed pages	5	17%
Business	4	14%
Health	3	10%
Lifestyle	2	7%
Other/not sure	2	7%

Table O. Problems (Health and Health Care)		
	Number of stories	*Percent of stories*
Disparities in care, includes doctor shortages, rural areas, and racial	7	24%
Lack of affordable health care, includes rising cost of premiums and number of uninsured	6	20%
High rate of obesity and related problems	5	17%
Poor health of Mississippi residents overall	4	14%
Divisiveness over health care reform	3	10%
Quality of health care in Delta counties	2	7%
Problems specific to African Americans	1	3%
Problems confronting hospitals	1	3%

Table P. Statistics Cited* (Health and Health Care)		
	Number of references	*Overall percentage*
Residents without health insurance	8	30%
State's obesity ranking	5	19%
Other insurance-related statistics	3	11%
Health statistics for African Americans	3	11%
Doctor shortage	2	7%
Diabetes figures statewide	2	7%
Statistics specific to Delta counties	2	7%
Uncompensated care rate	1	4%
Oral health statistics	1	4%

Table Q. Stories on Children's Health and Well-Being by Publication		
Name of Publication	*Number of stories*	*Percent of stories*

Clarion-Ledger, Jackson	9	41%
Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal, Tupelo	7	32%
Mississippi Link, Jackson	3	13%
Hattiesburg American	2	9%
Biloxi Sun Herald	1	5%

Table R. Placement of Stories on Children's Health and Well-Being		
Section	*Number of stories*	*Percent of stories*
News, main section	9	41%
Editorial and opinion pages	6	27%
State and Regional	4	18%
Health	2	9%
Other or not sure	1	5%

Table S. Problems (Children's Health and Well-Being)		
	Number of stories	*Percent of stories*
Quality of life, overall well-being, including poverty	6	27%
Unhealthy children, includes immunizations	5	23%
Obesity rate	4	18%
Parents' need for assistance, includes community programs, grandparents, subsidized care	3	14%
Lack of health insurance for children	2	9%
Lack of state regulations for home day care	1	4.5%
Infant mortality	1	4.5%

Table T. Statistics Cited (Children's Health and Well-Being)*		
	Number of references	*Overall percentage*
Children's health, Mississippi	8	47%
Children's well-being, Mississippi	7	41%
Health care	2	12%

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit research organization founded in 1999 to advance the nonprofit sector's communications capacity by identifying, translating and modeling relevant scholarly research for framing the public discourse about social problems. It has become known for its development of Strategic Frame Analysis ™, which roots communications practice in the cognitive and social sciences. FrameWorks designs, commissions, manages and publishes multi-method, multi-disciplinary communications research to prepare nonprofit organizations to expand their constituency base, to build public will, and to further public understanding of specific social issues. In addition to working closely with scientists and social policy experts familiar with the specific issue, its work is informed by communications scholars and practitioners who are convened to discuss the research problem, and to work together in outlining potential strategies for advancing public understanding of remedial policies. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

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[i] Pew Research Center for Excellence in Journalism, "How News Happens: A Study of the News Ecosystem of One American City," http://www.journalism.org/node/18897.

[ii] Moira O'Neil (2009). *Invisible Structures of Opportunity: How Media Depictions of Race Trivialize Issues of Diversity and Disparity.* Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

[iii] For more information, see the following web pages: http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/ecd.html ; http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/education.html;
http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/race.html;
http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/communityhealth.html

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[xvi] FrameWorks Institute (2009). "Framing Early Child Development MessageBrief." Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

[xvii] These findings are consistent with FrameWorks research on media frames around education. See, Tiffany Manuel (2009). *Don't Give Up on Education: A Cognitive Analysis of the Media Coverage of Education Reform 2007-2008.* Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

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[xix] Ibid.

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[xxvi] FrameWorks Institute (2009). "Framing Early Child Development MessageBrief." Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.

[xxvii] Ibid.