



**A FrameWorks Institute eZine**  
**A New Dominant Frame: "The Imperiled Child"**

Part of the beauty of strategic frame analysis is that it pays attention to both communications theory and methods. In this eZine, FrameWorks collaborator Frank Gilliam shows how one method frequently employed by FrameWorks and other communications analysts -- content analysis -- can help reveal the "dominant frame" that drives public preferences on a given topic. When we think about why we pay attention to media, this eZine helps us express the linkage between the pictures in the news and the pictures in our heads, with specific reference to children's issues.

-- FW

Research shows that the way issues are highlighted in the news often directs and determines judgments about politics and public policy. This is different from the concept of agenda-setting, in which the volume of coverage is thought to make an issue more salient. We are now able to show that it is not only the volume but the type of coverage that matter. How and why does this happen? The short answer is simple - "frames". What are frames? Frames are mental shortcuts that the media and individuals use to express, understand, and evaluate information. They are a composition of elements --- visuals, metaphors, messengers, scripts, narratives, and numbers --- which, together, organize meaning. The frames of news coverage - how a story is told, what it highlights as important, which actors it designates as critical and which it leaves out of the story - all work together to establish a way of thinking that becomes almost natural to us, and which in turn serves as our very definition of that particular social problem.

In this eZine, we highlight an important tool in the FrameWorks arsenal - the use of media content analysis to identify the "dominant" frame on children's issues. In FrameWorks parlance a dominant frame is the frame most chronically accessible to the widest number of people. As such, it becomes the basis for public thinking about an issue. It signals what counts and what can be ignored; it allows people to fill in or infer missing information; and it explains who is responsible for both the problem and the solution. For example, Gilliam and Iyengar's (1998) experimental work shows that

exposure to violent youth "superpredators" in the news increased adult support for punitive crime policy. As framing research would predict, policymakers have passed laws lowering the age at which a juvenile can be tried as an adult; imposed nighttime youth curfews; instituted wide ranging gang injunctions; and developed measures to place metal detectors in schools and search children's lockers (Males, 1998). In short, dominant frames have a demonstrable impact on public reasoning.

***Dominant News Frames and Media Content Analysis*** Dominant frames, as developed by news reports, are typically identified using media content analysis. Content analysis has been a valuable tool of communication researchers since the 1940s. Although relatively basic in its initial methodologies, the last few decades have seen a more sophisticated application of content analysis - focusing on concepts rather than simply words, and on semantic relationships rather than just presence. Content analysis provides researchers with the opportunity to investigate complex constructions of meaning, and their linguistic, affective, cognitive, social, cultural, and historical significance.

Content analysis begins by identifying key words, pictures, or concepts, and deciding how the presence of such words, pictures, or concepts will be recorded as data (e.g. coding protocol). Once a coding scheme is established and the data is recorded, any occurrence of recorded communication can be analyzed - including books, television news programs, newspapers, and magazines.

For example, in "A Silent Revolution: How U.S. Newspapers Portray Child Care," the Berkeley Media Studies Group examined the frequency of child care coverage in newspapers. The researchers looked at every story about child care published in 1999 and 2000 in 11 newspapers (4 of the largest national newspapers and seven notable regional newspapers). The results of the study indicated a stark lack of coverage of child care issues. This led the authors to offer a list of recommendations to child care advocates on how to increase news coverage; and to newspaper reporters on how to expand and improve coverage.

Despite the possibilities offered by content analysis, it is important to recognize the limitations. A central disadvantage to content analysis, for instance, is that the data collection and coding process is arduous and labor intensive. Another drawback is that the process is inherently reductive, particularly when dealing with complex texts. When a higher level of interpretation is sought, the method is subject to increased coder error. And, finally, content analysis must address what is NOT in the coverage as well as what IS highlighted. Some of the most important revelations come from comparing social scientists' assessments of a given issue with news coverage, resulting in such "null sets" as, for example, youth involved in community service. This level of complexity in content analysis requires input from social and policy scholars as well as media observers. Nonetheless, content analysis is a powerful tool with which to identify

dominant news media frames.

*The Dominant News Frame and Children's Issues: From "The Problem" to "The Imperiled" Child.*

The dominant frame of children's news coverage has tended to focus on the "problems" associated with young people. For instance, media accounts commonly play with themes of "troubled youth", "superpredators," "teen mothers," and "violent student athletes" (Amundson, Lichter, and Lichter, 2001; Dorfman and Woodruff, 1998; Dorfman, Woodruff, Chavez, and Wallack, 1997; Gilliam and Iyengar, 1998; Males, 1999; McManus and Dorfman, 2000; Kunkel, 1994, 1998). In this eZine, however, we identify a different dominant news frame than has been found to date - namely, the "imperiled child."

Under the auspices of Children Now I recently conducted the most comprehensive, nationally representative sample of local television news about children and children's issues. We videotaped the hour of local news prior to the network news in six cities - New York, Los Angeles, Boston, Seattle, Des Moines, and Atlanta - for the ABC, NBC, and CBS affiliates. These cities were chosen to maximize differences in market size, region, and demographic composition (i.e., race/ethnicity). In short, we taped up to 18 hours of local news programming each weekday for one month from July 1 - July 31, 2000.

The results from this comprehensive content analysis point to a new emerging frame: the "imperiled child". The core idea is a takeoff on George Gerbner's "mean world" syndrome. From this perspective, children are not only endangered by each other (i.e., superpredators), they are at risk from their parents, other adults, and from their broader environment. Although it shares common elements with the "problem child" frame, it is analytically and empirically distinct. As seen on the local news, the world is a dangerous place.

The imperiled child frame was readily evident in the top two story topics in our study: crime and health. As other studies have found, crime news is a staple of the youth beat. Almost half of the stories in our sample were crime-related (45%) and 85% of those were about violent crime. What is different in this study, however, is a decided focus on youth victims as opposed to perpetrators. Youth were depicted as victims in about 70% of the crime stories; on the other hand, youth were shown solely as perpetrators in only 11% of the cases. Interestingly, white children were much more likely to be cast in the role of victim; African American and Hispanic children were more likely to be depicted as perpetrators

Health news accounted for about one quarter of the children's stories in our sample. At a

certain level, we should probably be encouraged by the emergence of children's health on the local news agenda - at least it's not crime. Nonetheless, the imperiled child frame permeated health coverage. About one-third of the stories depicted youth engaged in at-risk behavior. This included stories about suicide, alcohol and drug abuse.

What was more interesting, though, was the finding that the plurality of health stories (39%) focused on accidents and safety. The fact that accidents were frequently shown in the news is consistent with the idea that children are also endangered by their broader social milieu. From this view, the environment is ripe with ever-present hazards.

The focus on safety, however, points to the broader implications for public discourse and policy. So, if as shown on the news, children are in grave danger, the natural response is to find ways to keep them safe and warm. To illustrate, safety stories in our sample commonly dealt with such issues as defective baby car carriers, immunizations, and warnings about Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.

In a recent Los Angeles Times Sunday magazine cover story, writer Susan Straight summed it up best by describing parent's "quest to bubble-wrap" their children to protect them from a "mean world". Not unexpectedly, the parents interviewed in Straight's story mentioned the news media and television in particular, as the source of their concerns about child-related issues.

It doesn't take much to see how the imperiled child frame reverberates through the public discourse. Parents and policymakers alike have called for stricter regulation and control over the lives of young people. Whether it is trying juveniles in adult courts, metal detectors and drug testing in schools, or safety regulations for everything from toilets to playground equipment, people are looking for ways to add another layer of bubble-wrap to their children.

The emergence of the imperiled child news frame has negative consequences for at least three reasons. First, it is not an accurate characterization of American youth. Research by people like Mike Males at UC-Santa Barbara and Jim Youniss at Catholic University consistently show that today's young people are the healthiest, best educated, and most civically-minded generation of Americans yet. Second, the frame's dominance crowds out other important child-related issues. The most notable omission is stories focusing on developmental issues. Less than 5% of the stories in our total sample were about childhood development. This is all the more troubling given recent findings about the importance of early childhood to growth over the life cycle. Third, there are significant racial and ethnic differences in the dynamics of the imperiled child frame. The most troubling pattern in our data is, at least in the context of crime, whites were almost exclusively portrayed as victims of violent crime whereas African Americans and Hispanics were most likely to be depicted as violent perpetrators. This news media

picture, then, reinforces a racial coding system wherein white children are seen in the context of danger (victim) and African American and to a lesser extent Latino youth are seen as perpetrators, requiring more stringent controls."

The implications of the imperiled child news frame are clear for public policy - heightened support for more punitive and regulatory youth policies. We will continue to spend more time worrying about what's in kids' lockers at schools, the appropriate height for toilets, and whether or not the school's playground equipment meets state and federal specifications. Concepts like enrichment and development will not enter into the public equation. Consequently, policy directives related to quality in day care settings or age appropriate after school programs will likely seem "frivolous," or non-germane, given the core definition of safety as the main child-parent concern.

As it stands, the television news presents a skewed frame of the lives of American children. Taken together, it paints a portrait of children in grave danger and need of protection. The challenge for advocates is to invigorate alternative frames that are more likely to set up developmental policy options. This is the challenge we accept when we "reframe" - not more of the same news, but substituting a different way of looking at the challenges and opportunities children face in order to prompt a reconsideration of our policy priorities for children.

***About FrameWorks Institute:*** The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit organization founded in 1999 to advance science-based communications research and practice. The Institute conducts original, multi-method research to identify the communications strategies that will advance public understanding of social problems and improve public support for remedial policies. The Institute's work also includes teaching the nonprofit sector how to apply these science-based communications strategies in their work for social change. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations, as well as toolkits and other products for the nonprofit sector at [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org).

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of FrameWorks Institute.

Please follow standard APA rules for citation, with FrameWorks Institute as publisher. Gilliam, Franklin. (2003). *A New Dominant Frame: "The Imperiled Child"*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

### References

- Amundson, D., L.S. Lichter, and S.R. Lichter (2000). "What's the matter with kids today? Television coverage of adolescents in America," Reframing Youth Issues. Washington, D.C.: FrameWorks Institute.
- Dorfman, L., K. Woodruff, V. Chavez, and L. Wallack (1997). "Youth and violence on local television news in California," *American Journal of Public Health*, 87, 1311-1316.
- Dorfman, L., and K. Woodruff (1998). "The roles of speakers in local television news stories on youth and violence," *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 26, 80-85.
- Gerbner, George. "Television's global marketing strategy creates a damaging and alienated window on the world," *The Ecology Of Justice (IC#38)* Spring 1994, 40.
- Gilliam, F.D., Jr. and S. Iyengar (1998). "The Superpredator Script," *Nieman Reports* 52,4: 45-49.
- Gilliam, F.D., Jr. (2001) "The Imperiled Child News Frame: A Content Analysis of Children on Local Television News in Six American Cities"
- Kunkel, D. (1994). "How the news media "see" kids," *Media Studies Journal* 8, 74-84.
- Kunkel, D. (1999). *The News Media's Picture of Children: A five-year update and a focus on diversity*. Oakland: Children Now.
- Males, M.A. (1998) *Framing Youth: 10 myths about the next generation*. Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press.
- McManus, J. and L. Dorfman (2000). *Youth and Violence in California Newspapers*," Issue 9, Berkeley Media Studies Group.
- Youniss, J. and A. Ruth. (2000). *Interim Report: Positive Indicators of Youth Development*. Washington, D.C. The Catholic University of America) unpublished manuscript.