



**A FrameWorks Institute eZine
Bridging**

"If they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don't have to worry about the answers."

Tom Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*

This Kids Count eZine takes up a popular public relations technique, bridging, and re-examines it in the light of what we know about framing, to create a more informed practice for use by children's advocates with media.

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

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

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

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

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

What does this mean? The question itself prompts a certain idea or cluster of connections in the mind of the viewer/listener. If the spokesperson repeats the frame as part of the bridging technique, we're 0 for 2 before we've even started. If you've just told the viewer/listener twice that "this is about safety," it's an uphill battle to get them to realize that "it's not really about safety at all, it's about education." Far from contradicting or dismissing the reporter's frame, we've accepted it and confirmed it, adding to the

audience's initial orientation to the subject. An efficient thinker will simply use those cues to erect the frame of interpretation that corresponds, and dismiss most of what comes afterward. There are ways around this problem.

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

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

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

RULE #1: NEVER REPEAT A NEGATIVE FRAME.

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

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

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

Another way to steer the interview with a bridge is to dismiss the old frame and immediately substantiate a new one. That way you signal to the reporter that you are giving them something new, a fresh angle on an old story, something that will make them look good with their editors or producers.

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

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

Always know the rules of the game you are playing. Is this a live or taped interview? Is there ample time to edit or is it scheduled for tonight's evening news? If it's taped and you

will be edited, you can reasonably assume that, if you give a great soundbite, the anchor will re-record or edit around you. So, PAUSE between your bridge and your declarative statement, so they can salvage the latter without catching several syllables.

The way it happened (live):

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

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

The way it was produced (canned):

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

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

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

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

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

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

In focus groups conducted over two years on children's issues in which Kids Count-like data was presented to participants, we have only rarely heard an issue discussed by real people with reference to the numbers. The fact is that many Americans find it hard to digest data and interpret it; mathematical literacy is a major hurdle. But, that aside, the psyche is often resistant to data that erode a comfortable view of the world. Quite often, the numbers are reinterpreted to substantiate an entirely different conclusion. From the social science roots of framing research we learn this maxim: If the facts don't fit the frame, the facts get rejected not the frame.

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

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

"The process of converting data into easily understandable information that communicates its relevance to an issue has been termed 'social math'," writes the Advocacy Institute (*Blowing Away the Smoke: A Series of Advanced Media Advocacy Advisories for Tobacco Control Advocates*, 1998). In a future Kids Count eZine, we'll explore this issue in depth. But as it relates to bridging, the trick is to have an interpretation, a "story" ready to translate the number thrown at you into a more powerful meaning. This does not mean you should drop all numbers, but rather that you should use them sparingly and always link them to meaning.

Reporter: "Isn't it true that 4 out of 5 kids under the age of three are cared for at home and end up doing OK in school? What's the problem?"

Spokesperson: "Our preschoolers are watching 15 billion hours of television every year. Only half of infants and toddlers get read to. What those numbers add up to is an enormous brain drain, since what we now know is that what is learned early is learned forever. If we nurture our kids on junk food or starve them for stories and stimulation, we aren't going to meet our economy's challenges tomorrow. Children are the future, and the future is being decided now in the inadequate child care centers we've put in place or refused to fund."

RULE #4: USE METAPHORS TO BRIDGE.

As cognitive linguist George Lakoff has demonstrated in his research (see *Moral Politics*, University of Chicago Press, 1996), "People reason metaphorically." That is to say that people make connections between one set of things and another. They use what is familiar (my family, my neighbors) to allow them to understand what is foreign or complex (my nation, other nations). Moreover, these metaphorical patterns are not "merely" colorful expressions; they are embedded in people's conceptual systems and

they are largely uniform across a population. They comprise a shared culture. And they direct action; all the parts of the metaphor come with the analogy: for example, if foreign countries are neighbors, they don't want us to meddle, we should only show up when they need us and then leave. The good news is that we often hold several conflicting views or potential ways of seeing an issue, depending upon the prism or "frame" through which we view it. So, if foreign countries are partners in a world community, then we have common interests and need to collaborate regularly. The challenge for the spokesperson is to bridge from a negative frame to one that sets up the kind of reasoning that favors positive social policies.

As George Lakoff and Joseph Grady have demonstrated, "If children are viewed as precious objects of a fixed nature, then simply storing them safely is a reasonable goal for a day care center. On the other hand, if children are seen as being malleable objects - as having their minds crucially shaped in a permanent way by their earliest experiences - then the requirements for day care are much more than mere storage" (see Bales, ed., *Effective Language for Discussing Early Childhood Education and Policy*, Benton Foundation with the Human Services Policy Center, University of Washington, fall 1998).

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

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

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

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

RULE #5: CONTEXTUALIZE

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

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

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

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

Bridging is an art, but one that needs to be informed with the social science of framing. To do it well: practice, practice, practice.

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.

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For further reading on bridging:

Wallack, Lawrence, Katie Woodruff, Lori Dorfman and Irene Diaz, *Using Pivot Phrases in News for A Change: An Advocate's Guide to Working With the Media*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1999.

For further communications research on early childhood education:

Bales, Susan Nall, *Communicating Early Childhood Education: Using Strategic Frame Analysis to Shape the Dialogue* in Bulletin of Zero to Three, National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families, June/July 1999, Volume 19, No. 6, available online from www.zerotothree.org.

Bales, Susan Nall, ed. *Effective Language for Discussing Early Childhood Education and Policy*, Benton Foundation with the Human Services Policy Center, University of Washington, Fall 1998, downloadable online from www.benton.org/Library.

Bales, Susan Nall, ed. *Effective Language for Communicating Children's Issues*, Coalition for America's Children with the Benton Foundation, May 1999, downloadable soon online at www.usakids.org.

Klein, Ethel. *Funding Early Care and Education: An Assessment of Public Support*, Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, March 1999.