



A FrameWorks Institute FrameByte Episodic vs. Thematic Stories

In his book, *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues*, Shanto Iyengar hypothesizes that different ways of framing news stories have different effects on how viewers attribute responsibility for both the cause of and solution to social problems. In order to communicate effectively about social issues, a basic understanding of these typical media frames and their effects is essential. Iyengar found that most news coverage of public issues is what he termed *episodic*. In short, episodic news frames are those that apply a telephoto lens to the coverage of the issue – focusing on individual case studies and discrete events. In contrast, thematic news frames are those that apply a wide-angle lens to the coverage of the issue – focusing on trends over time, and highlighting contexts and environments. An episodic frame presents a portrait, while a thematic frame pulls the camera back to present a landscape. The importance of this distinction is that the two types of frames have very different effects on how people view a given problem--and whether people will see the need for individual-level and/or broader social or institutional solutions to that problem.

This FrameByte examines how episodic and thematic stories differ, and emphasizes the importance of telling thematic stories to advance the public conversation about important social issues.

Episodic frames can be contrasted with thematic frames in many ways. Where an episodic frame would focus on an *individual*, a thematic frame would focus on the *issue*. An episodic frame focuses on a single *event*; a thematic frame focuses on *trends over time*. An episodic frame is more likely to keep its focus on the *private* realm (an individual's psychology, or behaviors within in a family) while a thematic frame would include the *public* (the surrounding environment, public institutions.) Episodic frames highlight how to *fix the person* experiencing a problem, while a thematic frame highlights how to *fix the conditions* that led to the problem. An episodic frame would more likely approach the audience as *consumers* ("news you can use") in contrast to thematic frames, which approach the audience as *citizens*. Finally, the solution to problems within an episodic frame is *better information*, in contrast to a thematic frame, which asks for *better policies*.

Episodic frames reduce life to a series of disconnected episodes, random events or case studies. In contrast, thematic frames identify shortcomings at the community or systems level that have contributed to the problem. This context is one of the missing ingredients that distinguish episodic from thematic reporting. Context defines an issue as "public" in nature, and therefore appropriately solved in the realm of policy. The more episodically social issues are framed, the less likely it is that citizens will hold government and other civic organizations accountable for solving the problem. The more thematic and contextual the coverage, the more likely it is that citizens will see the issue as one appropriate for collective action.

Here are two ways of explaining the problems of the health care system. The first story, while well intentioned, makes it difficult to see beyond the woes of one individual family. The second, in contrast, provides important information about context and trends and is more likely to create public interest and support for health care reform.

Episodic

For the better part of his life, Reuben Robinson, 22, of Camden received little professional health care. When he was a child, Robinson's family was uninsured, so they typically were treated at hospital emergency rooms when illnesses became serious. "When I got scarlet fever in the fifth grade, I had to go to the hospital, and again when I got a really bad flu when I was 19," Robinson said.

Health-care coverage continued to be a problem when Robinson, who is black, went to work. Until February, Robinson, who is married and the father of a 1-year-old son, Gabriel, was a sales floor supervisor for an office supply store in Cherry Hill. Robinson put in about 35 hours a week, but he and his family weren't eligible for company health benefits...

Fortunately, Robinson's wife, Shante, learned they were eligible for New Jersey FamilyCare, a managed-care program for low-income families. "If it wasn't for her, I'd still be without insurance, which is the only reason I didn't go and get a checkup," Robinson said. ("Working poor, minorities suffer from inability to get insurance," Shawn Rhea, South Jersey Courier-Post, June 19, 2005)

Thematic

A new report outlining a blueprint for fixing New Hampshire's health care system was released today by the Endowment for Health's "Pillars Project," a group of citizens and experts who have studied the issue since last year. According to "Stepping Up to the Future – a Healthier Health Care System for New Hampshire," it will take a sustained long-term commitment from health care providers, business and community leaders, and government officials to face the critical challenges facing New Hampshire's current health care system. "We can make a difference and protect the future health of our health care system," said Dr. Jim Squires, President of the Endowment for Health. "Doing so will require much effort, sacrifice, compromise and among all stakeholders, a willingness to change. To do any less, to fail to seize the opportunity to address the common good for each and every one of us, is simply not an option."

At the heart of the 20-page report is a blueprint for changing a health care system struggling with declining health insurance coverage; rapidly increasing expenses; rapid growth in insurance premiums; inadequate payments from public programs; strain on the health care safety net; and concerns about the quality of health care. "As citizens of New Hampshire, we have an obligation to ourselves, our families and our neighbors to ensure the stability of our health care system," said fellow Project member George Long, Vice President of Administration at Unitil Corporation. "The recommendations presented in our Report are not quick fixes, but important steps on the road to a healthier health care system."

Here are two contrasting stories related to childhood obesity. The first is an example of typical episodic reporting stemming from an isolated, tragic case of a single overweight child; the second approaches the issue from a thematic point of view by focusing on trends in school nutrition environments.

Episodic:

In Chicago, one of the world's fattest cities, doctors and child welfare officials have handled cases similar to this week's drama around an English boy so overweight that authorities investigated his mother for possible abuse or neglect. Authorities in England threatened to take custody of 8-year-old Connor McCreaddie, who at 218 pounds is three times the size of an average child his age. Connor was allowed to remain with his mother after she entered into a formal agreement with the Local Safeguarding Children Board.

"Yes, we have had [similar reports] at some point," said Kendall Marlowe, deputy director for communications for the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. "Situations such as this one are not common, but we're not saying it never happens. We do receive and investigate allegations of medical neglect, which can include issues of nutrition as well as other issues of providing proper medical care..." ("Parental guidance suggested?: British boy three times normal size," Leslie Baldacci, Chicago Sun-Times, March 2, 2007)

Thematic:

Spurred by the growing crisis in child obesity, the nation's schools have made "considerable improvements" in nutrition, fitness and health over the last six years, according to a new government survey that found that more schools require physical education and fewer sell French fries. The survey, which is conducted every six years, shows that more schools than six years ago offer salads and vegetables and that fewer permit bake sales. More states and school districts insist that elementary schools schedule recess and that physical education teachers have at least undergraduate training. More states have enacted policies to prohibit smoking at school and to require courses on pregnancy prevention.

Perhaps most striking, 30 percent of school districts have banned junk food from school vending machines, up from 4 percent in 2000. Schools offering fried potatoes in their cafeterias declined, to 19 percent from 40 percent. ("Schools Found Improving on Nutrition and Fitness, Kevin Sack, NY Times, October 19, 2007.)

Telling stories in an episodic rather than thematic way is important in changing the public conversation about social issues, and creating support for effective policy solutions to pressing social problems. Despite the media's tendency to feature episodic stories, communicators can learn to craft and promote compelling thematic stories that bring the public perspective back into the picture.

Diane Benjamin,
Deputy Director for Field Practice, FrameWorks Institute
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