



How Framing Influences Citizen Understanding of Public Issues

An Interview with Shanto Iyengar, a Leading Scholar on Frame Effects

In March 2009, FrameWorks' Jane Feinberg interviewed Shanto Iyengar, Harry & Norman Chandler Professor of Communication, Professor of Political Science and Director of the Political Communication Lab at Stanford University. Iyengar's work has been seminal in the development of FrameWorks' approach and the Political Communication Lab continues to contribute to our research. The interview that resulted from their conversation offers important insights into the scholarship of media effects and framing, consistent with FrameWorks' applications.

Feinberg: What are framing effects (as a theoretical concept)--and why are they so important?

Iyengar: They suggest that human decision making can be influenced by subtle cues in presentation, as opposed to the substitution of arguments or "facts." In psychology, framing effects have been the underpinnings for the argument against rational actor models of behavior. Tversky and Kahneman – the pioneers of framing research – demonstrated that people behaved differently when outcomes were framed either as potential gains or potential losses. They tended to tolerate more risk in the domain of losses.

Feinberg: Are framing effects just for the naïve and ignorant? Do framing effects hold for politically engaged Americans?

Iyengar: The evidence is quite clear on this score. Framing effects affect the politically informed and uninformed alike.

Feinberg: Why do framing effects not generalize from the individual to the collective and why do Americans fail to see interconnections between issues?

Iyengar: Episodic frames focus attention on individuals; it is easier to see cause and treatment in the person depicted than in the context. Framing, in this sense, is reasoning by analogy – the news is about this person, this person must have had something to do with the issue in the news.

Feinberg: Advocates are routinely advised by public relations experts to “put a face on the problem.” Can you explain why that is not an evidence-based practice?

Iyengar: Putting a face on the problem encourages people to seize upon the face as a relevant guide to understanding the causes and cures for the problem at hand.

Feinberg: When people think about “bias” in TV news, they most often debate whether it skews conservative or liberal. In your books, you seem to argue that the key distinction is between episodic and thematic coverage, and that the preponderance of episodic over thematic coverage makes policy thinking and public solutions harder and harder to think. Is that a fair assessment, and can you discuss this more broadly?

Iyengar: It is certainly a fundamental distinction in terms of journalism. Reporters tend to take for granted that a story with personalized story lines will have greater interest for the audience. Note, that the episodic-thematic distinction is a qualitative rather than quantitative form of media bias. Media may choose to cover some issues more than others; this would be evidence of quantitative bias most clearly apparent in the case of crime.

Feinberg: You say that episodic framing, in its emphasis on individual victims or perpetrators, is essentially pro-establishment. What do you mean by that?

Iyengar: People exposed to episodic coverage of various issues – crime, terrorism, poverty, racial inequality – tended to attribute responsibility for these issues to individuals rather than institutions or broad societal forces. Poverty, for instance, was viewed as a consequence of human laziness or lack of initiative; crime as a manifestation of anti-social personality traits. When people saw thematic frames, however, their attributions of responsibility were much more likely to focus on societal and political actors – politicians, policies, the economic context etc. In this sense, thematic framing encourages people to hold society accountable and vice-versa.

Feinberg: In your book, News that Matters (Iyengar and Kinder, University of Chicago Press, 1987), you remark that, “low levels of citizen awareness do not preclude political opinionation.” Why is this the case?

Iyengar: Americans tend to be very uninformed about politics. Yet they are by no means “ignorant.” This is because they can fall back on a variety of what political scientists call “information shortcuts” for making sense of the political world. Democrats tend to approve of the bank bailout because it was passed by a Democratic president. During campaigns, people rely on their assessments of the candidates’ personalities to judge whether they would be good leaders even though they know nothing about the candidates’ stances on the issues. These shortcuts or heuristics are the basis for political opinionation.

Feinberg: Does this argue against the so-called “Rational Actor,” or, as Michael Schudson calls it, the “Informed Citizen,” in a mediated environment? Put another way, is it enough to just get out the facts or is framing a mediating factor in citizen understanding and engagement?

Iyengar: The facts are generally secondary. The key question is which heuristic—or shortcut—can the media point to? Episodic framing points to dispositional or individualistic accounts of policy problems while thematic stories implicate societal accounts.

Feinberg: You say that the primary factor that determines opinions concerning political issues is the assignment of responsibility for the issue in question. Can you please explain why that is so important?

Iyengar: Responsibility is the most intuitive of concepts, so much so, it seems ingrained in human psychology. We instinctively want to know why something happened (causal responsibility) and how it can be prevented (treatment responsibility). It is one of the most basic “heuristics” for understanding events and issues.

Feinberg: You say that the critical measure of democratic government is the ability of citizens to exercise control over the actions of their elected representatives. How does/can framing make a difference in how citizens respond? Put another way, is the understanding of frame effects an important condition for citizen empowerment?

Iyengar: Accountability is the essence of elections. Voters need to be able to evaluate whether their elected officials have behaved in their interests. Thematic framing encourages voters to consider elected officials as relevant causes and cures for issues in the news, hence voters will focus on the officials’ performance when voting. Episodic framing, on the other hand, distracts voters from considering official performance as a relevant cause or treatment; it detracts from electoral accountability.

Feinberg: In your experience, are there issues that tend to be covered episodically, while others might be covered more thematically? For example, we are in the midst of an economic meltdown; how do you see coverage playing out in this context, or what would you expect to see, and how would you advise advocates to monitor news that helps or hurts policy advocacy?

Iyengar: The classic episodic issue would be crime. Unemployment tends to have more of a thematic element only because reporters tend to rely on economists or other experts as sources. I would think (without the benefit of any real data) that news coverage of the banking meltdown has also had a non-trivial thematic component because of the complexity of the issue and journalists’ need for experts to tell them what is happening and why.

Feinberg: Some have argued that framing thematically without first acknowledging personal responsibility ignores the reality of shared responsibility. You seem to be

arguing that personal responsibility is already advantaged by the structure and conventions of media reporting, and that thematic frames balance out that equation. Is that a fair assessment, and can you elaborate?

Iyengar: Thematic framing is an important balance not only because of the disproportionate level of episodic coverage, but also because American culture predisposes one to hold individuals responsible. The importance of individualism in this society cannot be understated – simply by virtue of growing up in America, we learn to hold individuals responsible. We do not also learn that policies and elected officials are just as important contributors to the state of national affairs.

Feinberg: Many advocates are being advised to use “authentic voices” of people laid off to drive home to the American public the consequences of bad economic policies. Can you speak to this advice?

Iyengar: This would be counter-productive because exposure to a laid off worker only encourages people to hold the worker accountable rather than the policies of the incumbent administration.

Feinberg: Some people say that the Internet has changed everything in the way we process news. Yet the Internet is often just a new road to the old frame shops. Have you examined how framing decisions might differ or repeat in on-line venues? Would you expect to see more or less episodic coverage in on-line reporting?

Iyengar: My sense is that the online news world replicates the conventional world fairly closely. However, people have much greater ability to choose a preferred provider online, making it more likely that they will avoid sources deemed “biased” i.e. sources they expect to disagree with. Republicans, for instance, are unlikely to read anything from the *Huffington Post* while Democrats will deliberately avoid Fox. For most citizens, however, whose political views are not intense, they will merely gravitate to their usual news source online meaning that the same pattern of episodic vs. thematic framing will hold.

Feinberg: What about the new class of citizen reporters? Would you expect them to provide more contextualized frames, or to ape the old framing rules?

Iyengar: From what little I have seen, I’d expect them to be very much influenced by the limitations of their cell phones and hence to provide little by way of contextualized reporting.

About Shanto Iyengar:

Shanto Iyengar holds the Chandler Chair in Communication at Stanford University where he is also Professor of Political Science and Director of the Political Communication Laboratory. Iyengar’s areas of expertise include the role of mass media in democratic societies, public opinion, political psychology and political

participation. He is the recipient of several professional awards including the Philip Converse Award for the best book in the field of public opinion, the Murray Edelman Career Award, and the Goldsmith Book Prize from Harvard University.

Iyengar received his Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Iowa and completed postdoctoral training in Psychology at Yale University through the support of the National Institute of Mental Health. Prior to joining the Stanford faculty, he taught at the University of California – Los Angeles and the State University of New York – Stony Brook. Iyengar is the author of several books, including *News That Matters*, *Is Anyone Responsible?*, *Explorations in Political Psychology*, *Going Negative*, and *Media Politics: A Citizen's Guide*. Since 2006, Iyengar has contributed a regular research column for Washingtonpost.com.