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

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 focus on individual case studies and discrete events. You might think of an episodic story as a portrait of a specific person’s experience at a specific time, in a specific place. Telling stories in this manner inadvertently reduces life to a series of disconnected episodes, random events, or case studies. They then link to individualized solutions, such finding a dental home for a single needy child.

In contrast, thematic news frames focus on contexts and environments. Rather than the portrait of an episodic frame, the thematic story pulls the camera back to present a landscape. Providing this context helps to define an issue as “public” in nature, and therefore appropriately solved in the realm of policy. Using thematic frames helps the communicator to effectively point to shortcomings at the community or systems level that have contributed to the issue at hand.

The importance of this distinction is that the two types of frames have very different effects on how people view a given problem. The way a story is told determines whether people will see the need for individual level solutions, or if they will be able to broaden their view to see potential social and institutional solutions. The more episodically children’s oral health is framed, the less likely it is that citizens will hold government and other civic organizations accountable.
for solving the problem. Therefore, it is best to focus on telling thematic stories that provide the context necessary for citizens to see the issue as one appropriate for collective action.

Newspaper coverage of children’s oral health remains highly episodic; in a recent FrameWorks study, 84 percent of the coverage was episodic in nature. Episodic coverage about children’s oral health is typically framed in one of two ways: 1) anecdotal vignettes from a discrete community event (such as an oral health screening) with little broader context, or 2) as a story about why individuals need to alter their own and their children’s personal dental hygiene habits.

There are many differences between episodic and thematic oral health stories. Where an episodic frame might focus on an individual child needing dental care, a thematic frame focuses on the issue of children lacking access to dental care. An episodic frame focuses on a single event, such as the opening of a school-based clinic; a thematic frame focuses on trends over time, such as the increase in school-based clinics in the past decade. An episodic frame is more likely to keep its focus on the private realm (such as parent behavior) and to focus on fixing an individual’s personal situation, while a thematic frame would include the public realm (the surrounding environments, public institutions, and policies that influence that behavior) and how to fix the conditions in which families find themselves.

A final challenge of the episodic frame is its tendency to approach the audience as consumers, rather than engaged citizens. For example, stories that provide information on how to brush your children’s teeth properly, or when to bring your child in for a dental visit, address the audience as consumers of dental services. In this story, the solution becomes access to better information about dental care, fluoridation, low-cost services, etc. By contrast, thematic stories show the larger picture and encourage readers to get involved and become advocates for better children’s oral health policy.

Here are two examples of stories about children’s oral health. The first story, while well intentioned, makes it difficult to see beyond the suffering of the individual child and family. The second, in contrast, provides important information about context and trends and is more likely to create public interest and support for reform.

**Episodic**

Twelve-year-old Deamonte Driver died of a toothache Sunday. A routine, $80 tooth extraction might have saved him. If his mother had been insured. If his family had not lost its Medicaid. If Medicaid dentists
weren’t so hard to find. If his mother hadn’t been focused on getting a dentist for his brother, who had six rotted teeth. By the time Deamonte’s own aching tooth got any attention, the bacteria from the abscess had spread to his brain, doctors said. ("For Want of a Dentist," by Mary Otto, Washington Post, 2/28/07)

As told, this story emphasizes his mother’s behavior and choices (not caring for his brother’s teeth, not finding a dentist, not coming up with $80, not going to the emergency room.) This will likely overshadow consideration of deficits in the Medicaid system.

In contrast, the following article from the same author, a year and a half later, provides the necessary context to understand the issue clearly and points to the issue of lack of access to dental insurance. It naturally leads to consideration of public, rather than private, solutions.

**Thematic**

The 2007 death of a Prince George’s County boy because of an untreated dental abscess was a tragic reminder of the connection between oral health and overall health.

Yet dental care remains the most common unmet health-care need of children in the United States. Tooth decay is five times as likely to be found in children as is asthma, which, like most common illnesses, is covered by health insurance. But at least 26 million children lack dental coverage, more than twice as many as lack medical insurance, according to federal health statistics.

Among adults, oral cancer kills more Americans than cervical cancer, and research suggests that oral infections can affect pregnancy outcomes and complicate chronic diseases such as diabetes. Still, 82 million adults have no dental insurance. ("Putting Teeth in Healthcare Reform: Advocates Press to have Dental Issues Addressed," by Mary Otto, Washington Post 06/23/09.)

Thematic storytelling is an important tool to use when working to change the public conversation about children’s oral health and create support for effective policy solutions. 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.