FRAMING STRATEGY

Storytelling for Social Change

Advocates across social issues tell stories about individuals to build public awareness about social issues, deepen understanding of social problems, and drive social change. The oral health field is no exception. Advocates for oral health often highlight poignant cases like Deamonte Driver and Kyle Willis, both of whom died from brain infections caused by untreated tooth decay.

Advocates tell these stories to illustrate the serious consequences of untreated oral health problems. Stories like these certainly garner attention, but do they also result in gains for policy reform? Some social science research suggests the answer is "no." This research finds that stories that zoom in on individuals lead people to attribute responsibility for the problem and its solutions to the individuals themselves—not to society. On the other hand, other bodies of research point to the power of stories as memorable, compelling, and relatable, which reinforces that communicators need to ensure that their stories are doing everything that they can do to advance public understanding.

Choosing stories that are both compelling and move the public to think systematically takes some framing knowhow. The first key to effective storytelling for social change is to know the difference between what political scientist Shanto Iyengar calls "episodic" and "thematic" stories. Episodic stories are narratives about specific individuals in particular places facing discrete or "one-off" events or experiences—stories that focus tightly on individuals like Driver and Willis, for example. These "portrait" stories situate oral health as a private problem that can only be addressed by individuals and families and simultaneously fuel people's fatalistic belief that oral health problems are inevitable and hard to fix on a broad scale.

Here's an excerpt from an episodic story about Driver that appeared on a recent blog post:

> Deamonte Driver … would have been looking forward to his 23rd birthday this year, a young life at the very peak of its potential. Instead, his mother is looking at the tenth anniversary of his death. Because she lost Medicaid due to a paperwork mix-up that resulted from the family having to move, and not having the $80 for an extraction, she could not find anyone willing to remove the abscessed tooth.
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> Eighty bucks. That's about what the average family spends on groceries in a week. For want

of eighty bucks, the bacteria in Deamonte's mouth spread to his brain, where it killed him on February 25, 2007, despite emergency brain surgery.

Thematic stories, in contrast, "widen the lens" through which people view a social problem. They are panoramas—not portraits. They highlight the broad social contexts and structural realities that surround and shape people's lived experiences, choices, and behaviors. By making visible the systems and structures that influence people's outcomes, thematic stories enable the public to think more expansively about the causes of and solutions to complex social problems. Such stories invite "big picture" thinking and boost people's optimism about our ability to solve difficult social problems. Here's what a thematic story about Deamonte Driver might look like:

> When it comes to oral health, different people have different needs. Some people have dental insurance, but others don't. Some people are covered by Medicaid, but others aren't. Some people have the time and resources to get to dental clinics, but others don't. Accessing good oral health is like going through a series of locked doors. If people don't have the keys they need, they won't be able to open the door to good oral health.

> Take the case of Deamonte Driver, a 12-year-old boy who died from untreated tooth decay. Driver's troubles began with a toothache, but he didn't have the keys he needed to get dental care. He and his family didn't have dental insurance, and they couldn't find dentists nearby who accepted Medicaid, the government insurance program for the poor. By the time Driver did get medical attention, it was too late—the bacteria in his mouth had spread to his brain. We can prevent tragedies like this by ensuring that all people have the keys they need to access oral health care.

Strategic framers know that the kind of stories they tell are just as important as how many they tell and how often. They look for and tell stories that:

- Focus on group efforts, not individual heroes or villains.
- Show trends or patterns that shape conditions for a community or group of people.
- Reveal the structural causes or social determinants of a problem.
- Demonstrate solutions that can be replicated or scaled up.

So, look for narratives that can foster thinking about broad-scale and longer-term change. And think about keeping a file of thematic or "wide-angle lens" stories on hand, so you will be ready to frame effectively even when facing a reporter's deadline. Also, choose images carefully to ensure that they complement, rather than detract from, your thematic storytelling. Make a dedicated effort to create images and photographs that you can give to partners and the media.

To learn more about the difference between episodic and thematic storytelling in our online course at FrameWorks Academy and in this video (password: fw).