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# Framing reality: shaping news coverage of the 1996 Tennessee debate on evolution

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FRAMING REALITY: SHAPING NEWS COVERAGE OF  
THE 1996 TENNESSEE DEBATE ON EVOLUTION

A Thesis presented to  
The Faculty of the School of Journalism and Mass Communications  
San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Science

by  
Cynthia A. McCune  
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## ABSTRACT

### FRAMING REALITY: SHAPING NEWS COVERAGE OF THE 1996 TENNESSEE DEBATE ON EVOLUTION

by Cynthia A. McCune

This thesis used triangulated research methods to analyze how public debate on a controversial political issue was framed, and by whom, as a means of understanding the process and outcome of that debate. Its findings support the constructionist view that public debates are framed by all involved parties – not just the news media, as suggested by traditional agenda-setting theory.

This study examined the sources of key news frames, as well as the cultural symbols and social values used to give them salience. It also considered how the relative power position held by each side in this debate may have affected their interactions with the news media.

The findings showed this debate was dominated by the voices and frames of the opposition. Although the legislation's supporters, acting from the dominant power position, tried to limit the debate, its opponents successfully broadened the scope of the debate and involved other groups.



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## Framing Reality: Shaping News Coverage of the 1996 Tennessee Debate on Teaching Evolution

This thesis analyzes how the public debate on a controversial issue was framed, and by whom, as a means of understanding both the process and the outcome of that debate. Several other recent studies have taken a similar approach (e.g., Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Liebler & Bendix, 1996; Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992; Robinson & Powell, 1996) to examine how advocates and social movements attempted to use legislation and the news media to “construct reality” and advance their worldviews.

This section of the thesis provides an overview of the theoretical foundations of this study. It also summarizes the history of legislative conflict over evolution in Tennessee, laying the groundwork for a more in-depth review of the political and cultural antecedents of this debate in the literature review section. This section concludes with an overview of the research method, the research questions, and the significance of this study.

### Theoretical Foundations

The 1996 Tennessee legislative debate on teaching evolution may seem to be an atypical example of a public issue. However, it is one of several recurring issues that derive from the same source - a deep-seated cultural conflict that often divides large segments of the populace of the United States. In addition to evolution, these divisive issues include abortion, homosexuality, school prayer, sex education, the role of women in society, and how America defines “family values.”

At the heart of all these issues is a clash between two incompatible worldviews. In *Culture wars: The struggle to define America*, James Davison Hunter (1991) defined cultural conflict as “political and social hostility rooted in different systems of moral understanding” (p. 42), and described these opposing worldviews as “the impulse toward orthodoxy and the impulse toward progressivism” (p. 43). This thesis assumes these opposing worldviews will be reflected in the framing of the 1996 Tennessee legislative debate and its news coverage. As Hunter and others (e.g., Nelkin, 1995) have noted, one of the primary arenas for public debate on cultural conflicts is the media.

Debates on public policy issues can be viewed as symbolic contests over which interpretation will prevail (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Other researchers (e.g., Carey, 1989) have emphasized the role of symbolism in shaping public perceptions and the ways in which social movements and institutions use symbols to help define reality. For example, Cherylon Robinson and Lawrence A. Powell (1996) drew heavily on Gamson’s research for their analysis of competing reality frames in the 1991 Senate Judiciary Committee hearings on Clarence Thomas. They concluded that whoever most effectively frames the debate usually wins the debate.

During the past three decades, many communications studies have focused largely on media effects and agenda setting. From the writings of Bernard Cohen (1963) to those of Maxwell McCombs (1994), many researchers have focused on the news media’s role in setting the news agenda for public issues. However, some recent studies (e.g., Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Hansen, 1991; Robinson & Powell, 1996) have gone a layer deeper to consider what influences the media and how they actually frame

debates on public issues. Instead of viewing the news media as the agent that frames reality for public consumption, and thus sets the public agenda, these researchers also view the media as a venue where groups with competing visions of society attempt to establish their worldview as the dominant one. In other words, they view the media both as an influential group and as a group that is itself subject to influence. From this perspective, which is exemplified by Neuman et. al.'s (1992) constructionist model of political communication, all key players in a public debate on a policy issue – including political advocates, the media, and the public – are actively involved in the process of framing the debate and, thus, in constructing reality.

To paraphrase Carey (1989), this thesis uses the Tennessee legislative debate as a case study to examine how participants in a public debate attempted to define reality in terms of their own worldviews through the use of symbols and social values and through their use of the media. This thesis also draws upon Hansen's (1991) observation, backed up by Robinson and Powell's (1996) example, that it is more enlightening to map how issues are articulated and how meaning is constructed than it is simply to try to determine whether the media influences public opinion, or vice versa.

Other theoretical underpinnings of this thesis include: Gamson and Wolfsfeld's (1993) concept of framing as a negotiation over meaning conducted among social movements and the media; Petersen and Markle's (1989) ideas on framing and resonance; and Gamson and Modigliani's (1989) definitions of framing and the use of "interpretive packages" and resonance.

In addition, the researcher examined the Tennessee legislative debate and its news coverage in terms of Petersen and Markle's (1989) and Gamson and

Wolfsfeld's (1993) ideas about how a social movement's power position affects its interactions with the media. This included reviewing the data for evidence indicating whether either side in this debate may have tried to broaden or limit the terms of the debate on this issue, or followed patterns similar to those seen in the social movements profiled by Petersen and Markle.

#### Overview of this Legislation and the History of this Issue

In February 1996, with the introduction of Senate Bill 3229, the Tennessee legislature once again considered the issue of teaching evolution. As debate began in the Senate education committee, the issue was picked up by the news media and brought to public attention. The legislation was quickly dubbed "the monkey bill" since it recalled for many the legendary 1925 Scopes trial, in which a Tennessee schoolteacher, John T. Scopes, was found guilty of teaching evolution to high school students. Thus began the battle of competing news frames, as the defenders of orthodoxy squared off against the proponents of progressivism in the Tennessee legislature and in the media.

Tennessee has long been a favored battleground in this conflict. The 1925 Scopes trial pitted two of the nation's most respected lawyers, William Jennings Bryan and Clarence Darrow, against each other in a legal and public relations battle over teaching evolution in Tennessee classrooms. The court fight drew national media attention and headlines. Although Scopes was convicted of teaching evolution, and Tennessee's so-called "monkey law" remained on the books, at the time many observers (including many in the news media) thought Darrow and the defense had actually won the battle for public opinion. A number of influential historians, along with the popular movie "Inherit the Wind," offered this interpretation of the Scopes trial (Larson, 1989 & 1997).

The State of Tennessee took up the issue of evolution again in 1961, when a bill to repeal the 1925 “monkey law” was soundly rejected. It was finally repealed in 1967. However, just six years later, the Tennessee General Assembly passed a new statute requiring that evolution could not be taught as scientific fact but only as a theory. Further, the 1973 statute specified that if evolution was taught, “equal time” must be given to other creation theories “including, but not limited to, the Genesis account in the Bible” (Nelkin, 1977, p. 51).

In 1975, a state appeals court overruled that statute, placing a damper on similar bills in other states. But in 1980, Republican presidential candidate Ronald Reagan gave new life to the creationism movement when, in a speech to a fundamentalist coalition in Dallas, he endorsed ‘equal time’ for teaching evolution and creationism (Berra, 1990, p. 123; Larson, 1989, p. 126; Wills, 1990, p. 120).

In 1981, a federal judge overturned one version of the equal time approach, the Arkansas Balanced Treatment Act. And in 1987, the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled against the Louisiana Creationism Act, which also attempted to legislate equal time in the classroom for evolution and creationism. In the face of these legislative defeats, creationists responded by modifying their legal approach and their public message.

Like the 1973 law that was overruled, the 1996 Tennessee legislation would not have completely banned the teaching of evolution, but would have prohibited it from being taught as a fact in the state’s public schools. The ensuing public debate involved politics, religion, the state's image, public education, and science – in roughly that order. In most of the political debates, and in most of the news coverage, the interests of education and science often

took a back seat to other concerns, such as the political clout of the religious right and the potential impact on the state's image. In fact, state legislators "devoted more effort to warning of [the bill's] public-relations impact than to defending the theory of evolution" (Larson, 1997, p. 263).

The Tennessee bill was finally killed, but a cultural conflict like this is never really over as long as the underlying clash between strongly differing worldviews remains unresolved. For example, later that year, bills to limit the teaching of evolution were debated and defeated in Ohio and Georgia. In 1997, the issue was taken up by the North Carolina legislature (Dubay, 1997).

Concern about continued attacks on teaching evolution prompted the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) to develop a guidebook on the subject, which was published in 1998. The guidebook's preface noted that less than half of all American adults believe humans evolved from earlier species, and more than half of respondents to a 1996 Gallop poll said they would like to see creationism taught in public school classrooms. The NAS said:

The widespread misunderstandings about evolution and the conviction that creationism should be taught in science classes are of great concern to the National Academy of Sciences . . . . We are about to enter a century in which the United States will be even more dependent on science and technology than it has been in the past. . . . Yet the teaching of science in the nation's public schools is often marred by a serious omission. Many students receive little or no exposure to the most important concept in modern biology, a concept essential to understanding key aspects of living things - biological evolution. (1998, p. 1)

### Research Questions and Method

This thesis uses the 1996 legislative debate on teaching evolution in Tennessee as a case study to analyze how the public debate on a controversial

policy issue was framed, and by whom, as a means of understanding both the process and the outcome of that debate. It also examines the role of the news media and political advocates in this ongoing cultural conflict.

Framing can be described as the use of familiar organizing themes and language to convey an underlying message to the public about an issue. For example, Todd Gitlin (1980, p. 6) described frames as “principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation” that reporters use to convey to the public which aspects of an issue are most important. However, this thesis, like some other recent studies (e.g., Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Liebler & Bendix, 1996; Robinson & Powell, 1996), assumes that social movements and political advocates have become increasingly sophisticated about influencing how the media frame public debates, so it is important to look beyond the media to determine how a debate was framed.

The thesis addresses four basic questions relating to how this debate was framed: 1) Which news frames dominated the newspaper coverage of this issue? 2) How and by whom was this debate framed? 3) Did either side in this debate use popular cultural symbols or social values to help advance their views? 4) Which side was most successful in framing this issue in terms of its own worldview?

In addition, this thesis also considers two research questions relating to the interactions between social movements and the media: 1) Did advocates in the Tennessee debate follow media interaction patterns similar to those described by Petersen and Markle (1989) and Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993)? 2) Based on Gamson and Wolfsfeld’s (1993) observations of how a social movement’s power



position affects its interactions with the media, is it possible to determine which side in this debate held the power position?

#### Triangulation of research methods.

This study triangulated research methods to access both quantitative and qualitative sources of information. This enabled the researcher to map how the debate on this issue was articulated and framed, and thus how meaning was constructed. This approach should provide an understanding of how and why one interpretation of this issue prevailed over the other – in the Tennessee legislature, in Tennessee’s major newspapers, and most likely in public opinion.

Research methods and sources of information include: content analysis, framing analysis, and qualitative data analysis of news coverage of the legislative debate from selected Tennessee newspapers; qualitative review archival data sources such as tape recordings of the legislative debate; and interviews with key reporters, legislators, and other advocates involved in the legislative debate.

#### Significance of This Research

In the past few years, legislation restricting the teaching of evolution has been presented to state legislatures and local school boards across the country, from New Hampshire to California. In most cases, media coverage of these legislative debates was extensive. After all, conflict makes good copy. What is usually reported, however, is the surface debate, not the cultural conflict that prompts it. As a case study, this thesis focuses on the cultural conflict behind the debate, and how the parties involved may have used the news media in their attempts to achieve cultural dominance.

As culturally based conflicts such as this become increasingly common in American society – and as political movements and institutions become

increasingly media-savvy – it is important to look beyond linear models of communication to consider how political movements and institutions both interact with and use the media to influence the outcomes of such debates.

This thesis contributes to the field of mass communications by building on existing communications theory and recent academic studies relating to framing, the social construction of reality, the agenda-setting role of the news media, and how social movements and the news media interact.

## Literature Review

The literature review begins by considering the background and history of the evolution debate, and the meanings ascribed to evolution, as a foundation for understanding the news frames and symbols used in the 1996 Tennessee legislative debate. This is followed by a discussion of how public views of science color the evolution debate, and of theoretical linkages between worldviews, scientific paradigms, and communications theory.

The focus of this section is a review of communications theory and recent studies relating to the use of symbols and social values to frame public debates on social issues. This includes a discussion of how social movements and the media interact, and examples of recent case studies that provide parallels to the Tennessee legislative debate. The conclusion summarizes the theoretical underpinnings of this thesis, lists the research questions, and outlines the research approach.

### The Meanings of Evolution

To many Americans, the ongoing debate about evolution seems silly. They are amazed that, more than 125 years after Charles Darwin published *Origin of Species* and after decades of scientific validation of the theory of evolution, some religious groups are still trying to deny the existence of this basic biological process. However, to those who hold orthodox religious beliefs, the debate over evolution is entirely serious. For them, evolution is part of a secular, scientific worldview that challenges the foundations of their religious beliefs and threatens their ability to pass on those beliefs to their children.

To understand how these opposing worldviews developed, it is helpful to consider some of the meanings ascribed to evolution. In the first 50 years or so after Charles Darwin introduced the theory of evolution, his idea found acceptance in many circles beyond science. George H. Daniels (1971) said the concept of evolutionary development fit handily with 19th-century ideas of historical progress, and it was quickly adopted by Herbert Spencer in his writings on social progress. Evolution became popularly understood to mean the "survival of the fittest." This interpretation was developed into the idea of Social Darwinism, which Daniels described as "a transference of the law of the jungle to the business world" (p. 257).

Evolution, then, fit the tenor of the times, which were dominated by the themes of industrialization, progress, laissez-faire economics, and traditional "village values" such as individual merit and "wealth as a reward for virtue" (Daniels, 1971, p. 259). As such, the theory of evolution was used by those in power to help justify and defend the established order, as they had once "invoked religion, tradition or prescriptive right" (p. 264).

However, as times changed, these same meanings of evolution provoked opposition. As industrial-age opportunities degenerated into dominance by robber barons, people's views of progress and evolution changed too.

Edward J. Larson (1989) described the 1920s crusade against evolution as a "mass movement fitting the interventionist pattern common to Progressive reforms" (p. 6) such as antitrust legislation, child labor laws, and women's suffrage. He said William Jennings Bryan, a lawyer and prominent Progressive, was initially concerned that evolution could be used to justify labor exploitation. But Bryan was further influenced to speak out against evolution by accounts

linking “German militarism to a Darwinian survival-of-the-fittest mentality” (p. 47). As previously noted, in 1925 Bryan served as lead attorney for the State of Tennessee in its prosecution of teacher John T. Scopes for teaching evolution.

Another factor in the emergence of the anti-evolution movement, Larson said, was the rise in religious fundamentalism. He described fundamentalism as a reaction against the “spread of biblical liberalism within the church and secularizing forces within society” (1989, p. 43). Larson said fundamentalism could also be attributed to disillusionment over the outcome of World War I, concern about a “perceived collapse of public and private morals,” and disquiet over “industrialism, urbanization and other forces of social change” (p. 40).

Concurrently, as the number of secondary schools in the United States increased, more children were exposed to the teaching of science. This only rubbed salt in the wound. Larson (1989) said, “More than anything else, the crusaders opposed evolutionary teaching because it harmed the spiritual and moral development of students” (p. 36).

By the mid-1920s, evolution had gone from being associated with economic progress and the growth of a nation to being viewed as a corrupter of American youth and a handmaiden to Nazi Germany. Consequently, Larson said, between 1921 and 1929 a total of 37 anti-evolution bills were introduced into 20 state legislatures (1989, p. 36).

Christopher P. Toumey (1996) said the conflict between scientists and creationists was inevitable because the creationists’ opposition to evolution is not just part of a narrow religious doctrine based on a few Bible verses. Rather, he said:

It represents a broad cultural discontent featuring fear of anarchy, revulsion for abortion, disdain for promiscuity, and concern about endless other issues, with evolution integrated into those fears. Regardless of whether one agrees or disagrees with creationist moral theories . . . evolution then becomes one of the symbols of that moral theory. (pp. 126-127)

### American Views of Science

American's conflicting views on evolution are inextricably linked to their mixed feelings about science. Although most Americans welcome scientific advances as signs of progress, at times they may wonder if the gains outweigh the losses.

Toumey said there are three public views of science in the United States. The earliest, the Protestant model, regarded curiosity about nature as an exercise in virtue and salvation (Toumey, 1996; Daniels, 1971). This model was the precursor of scientific creationism. The second model, the philosophy of useful knowledge, associates science with engineering and technology. This viewpoint is well integrated into American culture "since the fruits this model is expected to yield – progress, democracy, and independence – are as desirable today as they were two hundred years ago" (Toumey, 1996, p. 25).

The third model is what Toumey called the European scientific research ethos, which emphasizes pure, abstract science – science for science's sake. "Although [the research ethos] has captured the minds of most American scientists," Toumey said, "its intellectual substance is alien to large parts of the general population" (1996, p. 25-26) because it is not grounded in common American values. He concluded that "the values and meanings of science, as understood by scientists, are not well integrated into the values and meanings of American life" (p. 7).

In liberal democracies, science is sometimes perceived as a threat to individual freedom, said Yaron Ezrahi (1980), while in totalitarian states and traditional societies it is often viewed as a threat to the established order. He commented, "Science, as a central symbol of public culture, inevitably gets entangled in the continual border clashes between the domains of public and self" (p. 53).

Roger Handberg (1984) used C.P. Snow's concept of two cultures to help explain the clash between evolutionists and creationists. Snow described two cultures, one literary and the other scientific, which have such different worldviews that they find it difficult to communicate with each other. While Snow's two cultures may have had little in common, Handberg said:

Comparatively speaking, the differences there pale into insignificance beside differences between the most literal creationists and the scientific community. . . . There is a virtual chasm separating the scientific and creationist world views. The proponents of each view are literally talking past each other because the frames of reference are so completely disparate. (p. 50)

Thomas Kuhn (1970) made a similar point when he said "proponents of competing paradigms practice their trades in different worlds . . . [and thus] see different things when they look from the same point in the same direction" (p. 150). He said the only way to resolve such differing perspectives is for one group to experience the conversion of viewpoint that comes with a paradigm shift. However, Kuhn added, the transition between competing paradigms cannot be made "a step at a time, forced by logic and neutral experience. Like the gestalt switch, it must occur all at once or not at all" (p. 150).

It's not easy to change a paradigm, or to change existing beliefs or perspectives. As Perloff noted (1993, p. 323), "It is probably easier to introduce a

new belief than to change a well-developed one.” What is more feasible, however, is to influence the perceptions of those whose beliefs on an issue are not so well-developed, in accordance with the elaboration likelihood model of persuasion.

As described by Petty and Priester (1994), the elaboration likelihood model suggests that people can absorb information in two ways, either through central or peripheral routes. The central route involves an active, thoughtful audience drawing upon relevant information and prior experience to evaluate the position being advocated. They noted this may result in either the rejection or adoption of that position. In the peripheral route, however, Petty and Priester said attitude change may occur “when a person’s motivation or ability to process the issue-relevant information is low . . . [and] simple cues in the persuasion context [can] influence attitudes” (p. 101). In this case, they said, people may fall into agreement with a message because of its pleasant associations or because of what appears to be popular consensus on an issue.

The elaboration likelihood model highlights the importance of the symbolic meanings and resonances that can be attached to an issue by individuals, institutions, and social movements as they struggle to influence public debate and public opinion by establishing their version of reality as the accepted frame of reference.

### Framing Reality

James Carey (1989) defined communication as “a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed” (p. 23). According to Carey, the best way to study communication is to examine the actual social processes by which significant symbolic forms are created,



apprehended, and used. This includes studying how groups in a society struggle over the definition of what is real. The continuing debate over evolution is a good example of this kind of struggle.

Communication and social science scholars have, over the past several decades, developed a number of theories about how this process works. Researchers have returned to Lippmann's 1922 concept of reality as of the "pictures in our heads" to help describe how the media influence the public perceptions through agenda-setting (e.g., Rogers, 1994, pp. 234-243; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p. 33) and through framing.

### Agenda-Setting

Everett M. Rogers and James W. Dearing (1994, p. 80-81;) said much of the agenda-setting research of the past few decades can be traced back to the writings of Bernard Cohen, who observed that although the news media are not often very successful at telling people what to think, they are quite successful at telling people what to think about. Maxwell McCombs (1994, p. 15) concurred, concluding that the news media not only exert considerable influence on the public agenda, they are the dominant influence on the shape of the news agenda for most public issues.

However, Neuman et. al (1992) disagreed with this assessment, noting:

The disjuncture between the popular and media framing of public issues casts some doubt on the overly convenient refrain of the agenda-setting tradition to the effect that if the media cannot tell people what to think, the media can demonstrably tell them what to think about (Cohen, 1963; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). (p. 111)

Likewise, Lang and Lang (1981) earlier suggested that the agenda-setting model did not provide a complete picture of the role of the media's influence on

political campaigns because it sidestepped “the whole question of how issues originate” and how those agendas are built (p. 448).

### Framing

Framing is one explanation of how the media help set the public agenda. Framing assumes that the use of familiar organizing themes and language conveys to the public a latent message about a news story’s meaning, in addition to the story’s overt message. Frame analysis attempts to discern those latent meanings.

The concept of frame analysis was developed by sociologist Erving Goffman as a systematic way to explain how people use existing stereotypes and their expectations to make sense of everyday life situations (Baran & Davis, 1995). It was adopted by media scholars to describe how journalists organize and present information within familiar topical and thematic frames, both to simplify the process of news writing and to facilitate public understanding (McQuail, 1994). Todd Gitlin (1980) said standard framing practices allow journalists to “process large amounts of information quickly and routinely, assign it to cognitive categories, and package it for efficient relay to their audiences” (p. 7). Through framing, he said, journalists can highlight or emphasize some aspects of an issue while downplaying or ignoring others, thus influencing the focus of a public debate.

Robert M. Entman (1993) described framing as selecting specific aspects of a perceived reality and making them appear more salient as a way to promote a particular definition, causal interpretation, or moral evaluation of a problem. Similarly, Lang and Lang (1981) discussed the importance of salience in political campaigns when they noted, “Many differences of opinion originate from the

different weights people attach to elements in a complex situation. Therefore, the clever campaigner will seek to persuade by focusing on those issues that work in his or her favor while deliberately downplaying those that might work for the opponent" (p. 449).

More recently, Liebler and Bendix (1996) said the concept of salience - "the idea that certain elements of the story may be played up in such a way as to convey a dominant meaning" (p. 54) - is central to the framing of news texts. They regard the concept of framing as key to understanding the media's role in shaping debates on public issues. They described frames as both the actual characteristics of news stories and as "a strategy for journalistic construction and audience processing" (p. 54).

Although early framing studies focused primarily on the media's role in shaping public perceptions of issues in the news, later studies have paid more attention to how individual or group preconceptions may shape their reading of the news. For example, the constructionist model of political communication assumes an active role for both the audience and the press (Neuman et al., 1992). This model emphasizes that "all key players in the process are engaged in the construction of reality" (p. 119).

Liebler and Bendix (1996) noted that "frames found in the news media may have their roots elsewhere" (p. 54), such as the information campaigns conducted by the opposing parties in a debate. Further, Cheryl Robinson and Lawrence A. Powell (1996) said the media are most strongly influenced by the political players in a public debate. They noted:

In recent years social scientists have increasingly come to recognize that the power struggles that regularly take place between political actors, groups, and classes within democracies are not merely - as

Harold Lasswell (1950) once pointed out – a matter of ‘who gets what, when, and how’ but also a matter of who *defines* what, when, and how. . . . This question of ‘who defines’ – of who will be in a position to frame public debates over social issues and determine which interpretations are appropriate to place on the national agenda for public consumption – is an increasingly pivotal source of power in postmodern, mass-mediated societies. (p. 280)

Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) described this process of framing and defining issues as a negotiation over meaning conducted among social movements and the news media. They said, “Media output is an arena in which symbolic contests are carried out” (p. 118), and that both media norms and the broader political culture have a significant effect on this framing transaction.

Hansen (1991) also criticized linear models of communication because they “gloss over the interactive nature of meaning construction among and between institutions” (p. 447). Understanding the media’s role is not a matter of determining whether the media influence public opinion, or vice versa, he said, but rather a matter of mapping how issues are articulated and how meaning is constructed.

Gamson and Modigliani (1989) said, “One can view policy issues as, in part, a symbolic contest over which interpretation will prevail” (p. 2). They continued:

The media, in this model, serve a complex role. They are, on the one hand, part of the process by which issue cultures are produced. Because their role is believed to be so central in framing issues for the attentive public, they are also, to quote Gurevitch and Levy (1985, p. 19), ‘a site upon which various social groups, institutions, and ideologies struggle over the definition and construction of social reality.’ (p. 3)

Dorothy Nelkin, a sociologist at New York University whose research focuses on science, technology, and society, concurred with this assessment. She

noted, "In light of their influence on public policy, the media today represent a battleground for political and economic interests seeking to convey their views to the public" (1995, p. 77).

#### Symbols and resonance.

Gamson and Modigliani (1989) used the term "interpretive packages" to describe the symbols that give meaning to an issue. They said an interpretive package "offers a number of different condensing symbols that suggest the core frame and positions in shorthand, making it possible to display the package as a whole with a deft metaphor, catch-phrase, or other symbolic device" (p. 3).

Resonances can increase the appeal of an interpretive package by making it appear natural and familiar. Gamson and Modigliani (1989) noted that "certain packages have a natural advantage because their ideas and language resonate with larger cultural themes . . . that are part and parcel of one's cultural heritage" (p. 5).

For example, Taylor and Condit (1988) found the creationists had effectively used two interpretive packages that resonated with larger cultural themes - the concepts of equal time and fairness - during the public debates on the Arkansas Balanced Treatment Act and the Louisiana Creationism Act.

Hansen (1991) also commented on the importance of cultural resonances, noting they help explain "why some issues gain currency in public and media debate more easily than others" (p. 453). Barbara J. Nelson (1994) noted that one way to increase news coverage of an issue is link it to "larger, more over-arching [societal] concerns" (p. 101). Gamson and Modigliani (1989) added that since "making sense of the world requires an effort," (p. 10) the packages or frames

that are the most well developed and accessible have the greatest chance of being used and adopted by the public – and, it might also be noted, by the news media.

Research questions related to framing and the use of popular symbols, social values, and resonances.

Five of the research questions developed for this study deal with framing and the use of popular symbols, social values, and resonances. First, which frames dominated the news coverage of the 1996 legislative debate on teaching evolution in Tennessee?

Second, who framed this debate? Who were the key players? That is, which individuals, institutions, or social movements attempted to define this issue? And which introduced the frames that ended up dominating the news coverage of this debate? Further, did the news media itself introduce any frames? This finding would lend support to agenda-setting and the linear model of communication. Or did the frames used in this debate originate with the political players – the bill’s supporters and its opponents?

Third, how was this debate framed? In other words, how was this issue articulated and how was meaning constructed? Fourth, were popular cultural symbols and social values used by either side in this debate to create resonances and help to advance their worldviews?

Finally, which interpretation prevailed in this debate? Which side was more successful in framing this issue in terms of its own worldview?

Social Movements and the Media

When Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) discussed how social movements and media interact, they said social movements need the media for validation, mobilization, and scope enlargement (p. 116). It is through scope enlargement,

which is the involvement of third parties in a debate, that social movements gain power and the opportunity to change the existing perspectives about an issue.

James C. Petersen and Gerald E. Markle (1989) said the group with the most power generally tries to limit the scope of the controversy, while the challenger tries to widen the terms of the debate (also Liebler & Bendix, 1996). For a controversy to expand into a public dispute, they said it must be recast as an issue of values and “the value claim must be consistent with major social values” (Petersen & Markle, 1989, p. 9).

Petersen and Markle’s 1989 study examined three scientific controversies, including the debate over the use of laetrile as a treatment for cancer. This debate offers several interesting parallels to the evolution-creationism debate.

Reflecting Snow’s and Kuhn’s comments about the communications gap between groups with strongly divergent worldviews, Petersen and Markle noted that communication between the two sides in the laetrile debate was made nearly impossible because they held such different concepts of medicine (1989, p. 13). Likewise, scientists and creationists have very different interpretations of science. Petersen and Markle also noted that the scientific community initially dismissed the laetrile research because of the low prestige of those working in this area. Similarly, scientists have used the creationists’ lack of appropriate scientific credentials to dismiss their questions about the evolutionary process and the validity of the theory of evolution.

During the early research on laetrile, Petersen and Markle said there were enough ambiguities about its effectiveness to prevent cancer researchers from simply dismissing it. A similar situation exists in the evolution-creationism debate. Creationists have used the uncertainties about some of the mechanisms

of evolution to cast doubt on the theory itself and, thus, to gain leverage in the debate. Additionally, the laetrile advocates linked their arguments to the growing holistic health movement in the United States. Similarly, the creationists have tied their movement to popular concerns about “family values” and local control of schools.

In both of these cases, established science attempted to use the “ideology of expertise” to substantiate their views while the challengers used populist appeals, such as “freedom of choice,” to try to win over the public. Petersen and Markle (1989) noted the freedom-of-choice theme was popular with the public because it fit so well with the American value of individualism. Equally important, they said:

Laetrile advocates were adept at changing tactics to maximize their access to resources. When they lost battles within the scientific community, they expanded the scope of their movement through appeals aimed at the general public and through their campaign to legalize laetrile state by state. This provided new resources and a more favorable position vis-à-vis their opponents. (p. 14)

In a study of another scientific controversy, Liebler and Bendix (1996) noted Vale’s contention that societal values are as crucial as scientific knowledge in deciding policy issues. They said the way a controversy is framed reflects the successes and failures of the advocacy groups involved.

In a study of another controversy, Press and Cole (1995) considered the ways in which pro-life women have attempted to frame the debate over abortion. They found that the pro-life community, “through the careful construction of a particular version of scientific logic which supports their religious beliefs” (p. 381), had co-opted and transformed the opposing discourses to validate their own views. They said:



By assimilating the language of science and technology into their arguments, pro-life women not only neutralized this powerful competing discourse, but actually fueled their argument with the rhetoric of their opposition. . . . These transformed arguments may become seductive to mainstream audiences because they are supported with discourse that have broad appeal in the dominant culture (Press & Cole, 1995, p. 395).

By developing a competing theory, creation science, the creationists have followed a similar path. J. W. Grove (1989) noted that the creationists have attempted to link their views to the overall credibility of science while, at the same time, criticizing scientific methods, models, and authority as they relate to the theory of evolution.

Research questions relating to power position and the interactions between social movements and the media.

Two research questions for this study focus on the interactions between social movements and the news media, and their relative power position affects the two sides involved in this debate.

First, did the two sides in the Tennessee legislative debate follow patterns similar to those observed by Petersen and Markle in their study of scientific controversies? For example, did either side attempt to link its views to popular social values or trends, or co-opt the other side's terminology?

Second, based on Petersen and Markle's and Gamson and Wolfsfeld's observations about how a social movement's power position in society can affect its interactions with the media, is it possible to determine which side in the Tennessee legislative debate held the power position and which was the underdog? For example, did one side try to limit the terms of the debate while the other side tried to expand its scope and involve third parties in the debate?

## Conclusion

Recent studies of public controversies, scientific and otherwise, have confirmed the importance of understanding the role of symbols and values in public debates about social issues. Therefore, it is important to look at the accumulated cultural meanings of evolution to understand the debate that surrounds this issue. Often, science advocates portray this debate as a problem created by a lack of understanding of science. Many of them have yet to understand, as Liebler and Bendix (1996) commented, that societal values are as important to this debate as scientific knowledge.

Differing views on the meaning of evolution are just one facet of a larger cultural conflict about what America is and should be. The various parties involved in the struggle to shape American culture are vying for public influence, largely through the media. They are using all means at their disposal, including: development of strong and appealing interpretive packages that capsulize their viewpoints for the public; creation of cultural resonances by linking their version of reality with popular American cultural symbols and larger social themes; and attempts to broaden or limit the terms of the debate, in accordance with their power position in society.

Done successfully, these efforts exemplify the elaboration likelihood model of persuasion. The wise issue advocate understands that the active audience, which uses the central route to absorb and process information, is probably not the primary target of their appeal. These are people who already have an opinion on the issue, or who will be strongly inclined to form an opinion based on their own values and experiences. They are less likely to be swayed by the interpretive packages and resonances used in a public debate.

It is, as Perloff (1993) noted, much easier to introduce a new belief than it is to change an existing belief. No amount of preaching is likely to change the minds of the already converted.

The primary target, then, are those individuals most likely to use the peripheral route to process information on the topic in question. In common parlance, they are the “muddy middle” of American politics. As described by Petty and Priester (1994), these are individuals for whom the issue has little personal impact. Their motivation to seek out and process information on the topic is low. Thus, “simple cues in the persuasion context [can] influence attitudes” (1994, p. 101). In other words, these are people who can be swayed by well-developed news frames and finely tuned cultural resonances.

As Robinson and Powell concluded in their 1996 study of the framing of the confirmation hearing of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas:

In this brave new world of virtual politics, whoever effectively frames the context of ‘reality’ . . . ‘wins,’ and the critical element in political maneuver for advantage becomes the ability to successfully manufacture popular consent. . . . Exactly how the democratic process in postmodern societies will adapt to this qualitative transformation in the nature of political discourse remains to be seen. (p. 300)

For issue advocates, of course, the big question is which frames and cultural resonances will be most persuasive – which ones will stick in the mind and help bring people over to their side of the debate. In many cases, the frame testing process appears to be similar to testing spaghetti for doneness. You simply pull a strand out of the pot and fling it against the wall of media and public indifference to see if it sticks. If it does, it’s done – it works. And you use it again and again.

For this study, a framing analysis of news articles covering the 1996 Tennessee legislation can be viewed as an attempt to determine which frames and resonances “stuck” in this debate. To continue the analogy, interviews and documentary analysis can help determine which strands were plucked from the pot, and by which cook. The triangulation of methods and sources of analysis demonstrates how this debate was articulated, how meaning was constructed, and which side most effectively framed the debate. It also helps explain why some interpretations of reality “stuck” while others didn’t.

#### Research Approach

By focusing on news coverage and documentation of the 1996 evolution legislation, this thesis provides a case study of an attempt to influence public opinion and votes on a controversial issue. The frames of analysis for this study were drawn from the specific political and cultural themes politicians and other advocates used during this legislative debate as they attempted to link their arguments to popular cultural values and social trends, as well as those drawn from books and journal articles on this topic.

## Method

This thesis combines quantitative and qualitative research approaches to fully explore the research questions. The quantitative methods of analysis provide a foundation of hard data for this study, while the use of qualitative data sources and methods augments and adds depth to the quantitative data by providing corroboratory evidence. Qualitative research also provides the means to address some of the more culturally oriented research questions. As Thomas R. Lindlof (1995) noted, qualitative research methods are “more suitable than quantitative methods for addressing certain questions about culture, interpretation, and power” (p. 10) because of their focus on understanding and explaining the event or situation under study.

Quantitative methods used for this study include content analysis and framing analysis of a sample of newspaper articles covering the Tennessee legislation on teaching evolution. Qualitative methods used for this study include pattern matching and reduction through qualitative content coding. Qualitative data sources include focused interviews, documentary evidence, and archival documents.

### Triangulation

Robert K. Yin (1994) said multiple sources of evidence can be used to provide multiple measures of the same phenomenon. He said the advantage of using this approach is its potential to develop converging lines of inquiry, which can make the study’s findings or conclusion “much more convincing and accurate” (p. 92). Lindlof (1995) also noted that triangulation of different

research methods, and of different data sources, enables the researcher to make “a comparative assessment of more than one form of evidence about an object of inquiry” (p. 239).

#### Data source triangulation.

This study triangulates multiple sources of data. The primary source of data in this study are news articles on the legislation which appeared in four selected Tennessee newspapers while the legislation was under consideration (February 8 to March 31, 1996). Other sources of data include: archival documents such as audiotapes of the legislative debate from the Tennessee State Library & Archives; related documentation such as copies of key speeches given in the Senate during the debate; and focused interviews with key legislators and advocates involved in both sides of the debate and with the newspaper reporters who most closely covered this debate.

#### Triangulation of methods of analysis.

This study also uses multiple methods of analysis. In addition to using content analysis and framing analysis to provide a quantitative analysis of the data, it also uses qualitative techniques such as interviewing, qualitative data analysis, and pattern matching. Yin (1994) described pattern-matching logic as “one of the most desirable strategies to use for case study analysis” (p. 106) since, if patterns coincide, the results strengthen the study’s internal validity.

#### Theory triangulation.

This study also uses multiple theoretical perspectives. In addition to communications theories relating to agenda setting and framing, this study draws upon cultural studies to consider: the use of symbols and social values in the framing of a public issue debate; whether or not this situation reflects the

observations of prior researchers regarding the interactions of social movements and the media; if either side in this debate attempted to co-opt the opposing side's discourses to validate its own views.

#### Other research approaches.

Several other research approaches might have provided helpful data for a study of this type, but could not be used because of its timing. For example, surveys of Tennessee voters at the start of this debate and after its conclusion would have provided another measure of which news frames were most influential. Direct observation of the legislative debate, rather than listening to it on audiotape, might have yielded more compelling and insightful data.

However, since the researcher's study of this topic began nearly a year after the conclusion of the legislative debate, these options were not available.

Consequently, the triangulation of research approaches used in this study represents the best option available to the researcher.

#### Quantitative approaches

Quantitative methods – content and frame analysis – are used in this study to answer the first three research questions: 1) Which news frames dominated the newspaper coverage of this debate? 2) Who framed this debate? 3) Which side in this debate was more successful in framing the issue in terms of its own worldview?

The answers to these questions also lay a foundation for the qualitative aspects of this study. For example, reviewing the chronology of news frames and their sources should indicate whether one side in the debate tried to broaden its scope and mobilize third parties while the other side tried to limit the scope of the debate.

### Content analysis.

Earl Babbie (1998, p. 309) said content analysis methods may be applied to virtually any form of communication including, as is the case in this study, newspapers, speeches, and laws. He said two strengths of content analysis are its economy and unobtrusiveness. Also, because researchers can code for both the manifest and latent content of the communications under study, Babbie said they can achieve both depth and specificity of understanding and validity and reliability of results. The main weakness of content analysis is that it is limited to the examination of recorded communications. However, the use of other sources of data, such as focused interviews with participants in the debate, should help overcome that potential drawback.

### Data sources.

The primary data sources for this case study are the state's three largest daily newspapers. These newspapers were selected primarily because of their prominence within the state, as indicated by their circulation figures and state-wide distribution. These newspapers are also representative of the state's three distinct geographic and cultural/political regions. A fourth, smaller daily was also added to the sample as a form of negative case testing. As the home town paper of the legislation's senate sponsor, it might reflect a somewhat different news perspective. Newspapers selected for this study are:

- *The Commercial Appeal* of Memphis, with a circulation of approximately 188,700 on weekdays and 267,900 on Sundays
- *The Knoxville News Sentinel*, with a circulation of approximately 115,600 on weekdays and 167,500 on Sundays
- *The Tennessean* of Nashville, with a circulation of approximately 146,750 weekdays and 281,900 on Sundays



- *The Herald Citizen* of Cookeville, with a circulation of approximately 11,000 daily and 13,275 on Sundays.

Tennessee is a large, longitudinal mid-Atlantic state with a variety of geographic and cultural influences. East Tennessee, with its steep hills and river valleys, is considered part of Appalachia. Its biggest city is Knoxville, which is home to the *Knoxville News Sentinel*. Favorite tourist attractions in this part of the state are the Great Smoky Mountains, the factory outlet malls of Pigeon Forge, and country singer Dolly Parton's Dollywood theme park. East Tennessee is the least ethnically diverse part of the state, as well as the most politically conservative and most Republican region of the state.

West Tennessee consists of flatland plains, bordered on the west by the Mississippi River. Its largest city, Memphis, is home to the *Commercial Appeal*, as well as to Elvis's Graceland and a pyramid-shaped gambling mecca. West Tennessee has a more ethnically diverse population than the other parts of the state. Politically, it is more Democratic.

*The Tennessean* is headquartered in Nashville, the state capital, in Central Tennessee. Nashville is home to a thriving country music industry and tourist destinations such as Opryland USA and the Grand Ole Opry. Politically, the central region of the state tends to fall between the political extremes of east and west. The small daily selected for this sample is also located in Central Tennessee; Cookeville is about 50 miles east of Nashville.

#### Sample Size & Time Period

The sample consists of all 62 news articles, sidebars, columns, and editorials on this issue that were published by the four newspapers selected for this study while the bill was under debate. Tennessee Senate Bill 3229 was introduced on February 8, 1996. News coverage of the bill began on Feb. 9, 1996,

and continued through March 29, 1996, the day after the bill was defeated in the Tennessee senate.

#### Quantitative coding and levels of analysis.

This study used two levels of quantitative analysis: the overall article and the major news frames and their sources. (See Appendix A for sample coding sheets with accompanying frame and source definitions.)

All articles were coded for several variables at the first stage of analysis. These include the following nominal variables: the newspaper in which the article appeared (*Commercial Appeal*, *Herald Citizen*, *News Sentinel*, *The Tennessean*); its publication date (e.g., 03-21-96); the type of article (general news article, feature article, sidebar, editorial, other opinion piece); two indicators of the article's prominence, its placement (front page, second front [1b] or front page of a Sunday section, editorial page, or inside page) and its length (word count); and the main focus of the article (overall topics that are related to likely frames).

Also included in this stage of analysis were several variables using ordinal measures. These included the tone of the headline, the tone of the overall article, and the tone of any accompanying photograph or illustration. The following scale was used for these measures: 1) very favorable (i.e., strongly favors the legislation); 2) favorable; 3) neither favorable nor unfavorable; 4) unfavorable; and 5) very unfavorable (i.e., strongly opposes the legislation).

The second stage of analysis focused on news frames, using frames as the unit of analysis. In all, 25 separate news frames were identified for this study, not including the "other" category. Coders identified all major news frames

appearing in each article included in the study, based on definitions developed by the researcher.

Frame definitions.

Frames were also grouped into three categories, according to their orientation toward the legislation and their usage: “pro” frames are those that were used by the bill’s proponents in support of the legislation; “con” frames were used by the bill’s opponents against the legislation; and “mixed” frames were used either by both sides or by reporters to provide context. The frames used for this study are listed below, with the definitions used and refined during the coding process. They are:

1. Monkey Bill Frame (CON): all references to this legislation as “the monkey bill,” or to “monkeying around.”
2. Right-Wing Politics Frame (CON): references to conservative politics and the political maneuvering behind this legislation (e.g., “it’s politically motivated” . . . “it shows the political clout of the religious right” . . . “it was prompted by legislators needing to shore up their conservative credentials,” etc.)
3. Morals/Values Frame (PRO): references to the moral issues and religious beliefs that prompted this legislation (e.g., “the issue is morality,” “it’s about values,” and “it’s about truth, not religion”). This frame includes comments that teaching evolution undermines the church and/or the family, or contributes to moral decline.
4. Protecting Children Frame (PRO): this frame suggests that children are easily influenced and need to be protected from the negative/confusing/misleading influence of teaching about evolution. Sometimes those using this frame also assert that children should be able to make up their own minds about creationism and evolution.
5. Education Frame (CON): all comments regarding the bill’s potential *negative* impact on students and academic performance (such as on SAT scores) and on the quality of education, especially higher education.

6. Unconstitutional Frame (CON): all assertions about the unconstitutionality of the bill, including references to court decisions striking down similar legislation and upholding the separation of church and state.
7. State's Image Frame (CON): all comments that the legislation is drawing negative national/international media attention and will hurt the state's image (e.g., it opens the state to national ridicule, "makes us look like rubes and yokels") and may discourage businesses from investing in the state.
8. Ridicule Frame (CON): all comments that ridicule the legislation through name-calling or example (e.g., it's junk/foolish/ridiculous/Neanderthal legislation or "why not ban the law of gravity next?")
9. "It's Serious" Frame (PRO): the bill's sponsors used this frame to assert the seriousness of their efforts and the legislation (e.g., "it's serious legislation" and "it's a simple bill with broad-based support," etc.)
10. Scopes/History Frame (MIXED): all references to the 1925 Scopes trial, the original "Monkey Law," and the history of the evolution debate in Tennessee.
11. Evolution/Science Frame (CON): discussion of the theory of evolution, how evolution works, and Charles Darwin's research. Also, the defense of evolution as science (e.g., "evolution is a proven theory" and "scientists agree it's a fact" [scientific ideology of expertise], and "evolution forms the basis for all biology" [science as useful knowledge], etc.)
12. Evolution and Creationism Frame (MIXED): this frame compares and/or explains these differing world views, or discusses the sources of conflict between religion and science. This frame was used by both sides in this debate, as well as by reporters, columnists, and editorial writers for context.
13. "It's Confusing" Frame (CON): all assertions that the bill should not be passed because it is too poorly written, confusing, vague, etc.

14. Theory Frame (MIXED): the scientific definition of a “theory” vs. the common usage of the word. “Theory” was misused for maximum confusion by both sides in this debate.
15. “Not a Fact” Frame (PRO): includes all assertions by the bill’s supporters that evolution is a “just theory, not a fact,” and so should not be taught as a fact.
16. Equal Time Frame (PRO): equates evolution and creationism as theories of life’s beginnings, and calls for fair and equal treatment of creationism in the classroom. Also includes assertions that teachers and students should be allowed to discuss all theories of creation, including creationism.
17. Christian Rights Frame (PRO): this frame asserts that Christians have the right to be involved in politics (e.g., “Christian parents have rights too” and “this bill was introduced on behalf of Christians,” etc.)
18. Mandate/Local Control Frame (CON): all assertions that the bill is a state mandate that would interfere with local control of schools (e.g., “the state shouldn’t dictate curriculum” and this is legislative interference in teaching process).
19. Radical Right Frame (CON): this frame labels the bill’s sponsors as “right-wingers” or the “radical right,” etc.
20. Secular Frame (PRO): this frame labels the bill’s opponents as atheists or secular humanists; also includes other references to secular humanism or unGodliness.
21. Agriculture/Micro-Macro Evolution Frame (CON): asserts that limiting the teaching of evolution could interfere with teaching selective breeding and genetics in agriculture programs at state universities. This frame also includes discussions of micro-evolution and macro-evolution.
22. Overzealous Teachers Frame (PRO): all references by the bill’s supporters to “overzealous” teachers who are teaching evolution as fact instead of as a theory
23. Intimidate Teachers Frame (CON): this frame describes the legislation as an attempt to “intimidate teachers” and prevent them from teaching evolution. It also includes references to how the bill threatens

“academic freedom,” or how students could use it to retaliate against teachers.

24. Cost Frame (CON): this frame asserts that the legislation will be too costly because it will require the purchase of expensive new textbooks for the state’s public schools
25. God/Bible Frame (MIXED): Both sides in this debate asserted their belief in God – some as a reason why they were voting for the evolution bill; some (“I believe in God but . . .”) as they voted against it.
26. Other (MIXED): any frame not previously defined that received more than one but less than five mentions in the 61 articles included in this study.

#### Source types.

Each frame was also coded for type of source(s), to help determine who framed the debate. Sources were defined as individuals or groups who were quoted or paraphrased in the articles (or the editorial writer, columnist, or reporter, in cases of unattributed frames or editorial commentary).

As indicated in Table 1, source types were further identified by their attitude toward the legislation. Sources favorable to the legislation were identified as “pro;” those unfavorable towards it were identified as “con;” and those that neither favored nor opposed the legislation were identified as “neither/neutral.” For example, a legislator who supported the bill was coded as “pro/legislator,” while one who opposed it was a “con/legislator,” and one who straddled the fence on the issue was a “neu/legislator.” This system of coding made it possible to readily differentiate sources who supported the legislation from those who opposed it.

**Table 1****Coding Source Types and Their Attitudes Toward the Legislation**

Source	Attitude
Tennessee Legislator	PRO (supports the evolution bill) Neutral or Mixed CON (opposes the evolution bill)
Other government official	PRO (supports the evolution bill) Neutral or Mixed CON (opposes the evolution bill)
Political advocate	PRO (e.g., Christian Coalition representative) CON (e.g., ACLU, Tennessee Education Assn.)
Teacher/professor/student	PRO (supports the evolution bill) Neutral or Mixed CON (opposes the evolution bill)
Religious leader/minister	PRO (supports the evolution bill) Neutral or Mixed CON (opposes the evolution bill)
Creationism advocate	PRO (supports the evolution bill)
Scientist or science advocate	CON (opposes the evolution bill)
Editorial writer/columnist	PRO (supports the evolution bill) CON (opposes the evolution bill)
Reporter	Neutral/Neither
Other/unidentified	PRO (e.g., "supporters of the bill") CON (e.g., "critics of the bill")
Other	(Specify attitude)

For the purposes of this study, reporters were considered to be neutral. Reporters were listed as sources only when they provided straight news or contextual information that happened to include a specific frame. This most often occurred in the opening paragraph of a news article, where reporters tended to provide an update on the status of the “monkey bill,” or later in an article when a reporter might include a paragraph summarizing the 1925 Scopes trial to provide historical context for discussion of the 1996 legislative debate.

#### Coding Reliability

To provide a calculation of coding reliability, a second coder reviewed 10 percent of the quantitative data (7 out of 62 articles). The articles were selected by systematic sample with a random start. Since two coders were used, the researcher initially planned to use the Scott’s pi formula to calculate reliability. However, because of the large number of variables in this study (27 possible frames and 22 possible source categories), it was not feasible to calculate percent agreement expected, which made it impossible to use this formula. Because of this, the admittedly less accurate Holsti formula for intercoder reliability was used.

#### Qualitative Approaches

In essence, the qualitative aspects of this thesis take the form of a case study. Robert K. Yin (1994, p. 80) addressed the strengths and weaknesses of research methods commonly used for case studies.

#### Interviews.

Yin described interviewing is a targeted research method that can provide insightful data and perceived causal inferences. Interview data may be used to corroborate other sources of data in a study. However, he said interviewing



does have some significant weaknesses, both as a method and as a source of data. Interviewing can be prone to response bias, reflexivity, and problems related to inadequate question construction. Since interview data must be considered as verbal reports only, Yin said it is best to corroborate it with information from other sources.

For this study, 11 interviews were conducted. Those interviewed include: four legislators who were directly involved in the debate (one “pro,” two “con,” and one “mixed”); three political advocates who were frequently quoted in the news articles used in this study (one “pro” and two “con”); and four reporters who covered the legislative debate for the newspapers used in this study.

Legislators interviewed for this study include: Rep. Zane Whitson, the author of the bill and its House sponsor; Sen. Andy Womack, chairman of the Senate Education Committee and a strong opponent of the bill; Sen. Steve Cohen, an early opponent of the bill; and Sen. Roscoe Dixon, who was initially a lukewarm supporter of the bill but finally voted against it.

The researcher had also hoped to talk to Sen. Tommy Burks, the senate sponsor of the bill, but he could not be reached and did not respond to several messages requesting an interview. (Note: Burks was shot to death at his farm October 18, 1998, allegedly by a political rival.)

Political lobbyists interviewed for this study were: Jon Crisp, who was then state director of the Tennessee Christian Coalition; Hedy Weinberg, Tennessee director of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU); and Jerry Winters, lobbyist for the Tennessee Education Association (TEA).

Reporters interviewed for this study were: Duren Cheek, staff writer covering state government for *The Tennessean* (he wrote 12 articles on this issue);

Ray Waddle, religion editor for *The Tennessean* (he wrote 4 articles); Paula Wade, Nashville bureau reporter for the *Commercial Appeal* (she wrote 5 articles on this issue); and Jesse Fox Mayshark, former staff writer on the education beat for the *News Sentinel* (he wrote 2 articles on this issue).

(Appendix B lists the reporters who covered this issue for the newspapers included in this study. Appendix C lists interview questions for legislators and political advocates, and Appendix D lists interview questions for reporters.)

In this study, interview data was compared to the results of the quantitative analysis and to other documentary and archival evidence for corroboration. In addition, the interviews were also used to corroborate and expand on other sources of data used in the study.

#### Documents and archives.

Yin (1994, p. 80) described documents and archives as stable, exact, and unobtrusive sources of data, but said both sources are prone to problems of accessibility, retrievability, and reporting bias. Their best use, he said, is to augment and corroborate evidence from other sources. In this case study, data from tape recordings of the legislative debate were used primarily to double-check the identity of sources of key news frames to corroborate information reported in news articles and interviews. Documentary evidence, which included copies of key speeches presented to the Senate during the course of the legislative debate, was also used to corroborate information reported in news articles and interviews.

#### Qualitative analysis.

Qualitative methods of analysis used for this study include pattern matching and reduction through qualitative content coding. Similar to content

analysis, qualitative content coding is used to label, compile, and organize data. However, Lindlof (1995) noted, "The notion of calculating intercoder agreement as found in formal content analysis does not apply in qualitative content coding" (p. 221). Rather, he said, the analyst builds and continually clarifies coding categories as part of the process of data analysis.

Lindlof described content coding as "a process in which the researcher creatively scans and samples data-texts, looks for commonalities and differences, and begins to formulate categories of interest" (1995, p. 224). As the coding process continues, the researcher may find that some categories can be consolidated or that new categories must be created to accommodate data that doesn't fit in existing groupings. "What is reduced is not the data, but the terminology and the categories that are necessary for a focused, selective accounting of the phenomenon," Lindlof said (p. 224).

The researcher initially identified 26 frames used to describe this legislation during the course of the debate. They ranged from the "monkey bill" frame, which derogatorily labeled the 1996 bill and linked it to the 1925 monkey law, to the "not a fact" frame, which insisted that evolution is just a theory, not a fact.

Because of the high number of frames used, some related minor frames were combined after the initial coding. For example, since the "science" frame appeared only four times, it was combined with the closely related "evolution" frame to form the "evolution/science" frame. Similarly, the "it's about the truth" frame also received just four mentions. It was later combined with two similar assertions about the bill's intent (e.g., "it's about morals" and "it's about values") to form the "morals/values" frame.

Some frames were later split for clarification. For example: the “intimidate teachers” was initially part of the “education” frame, but the two were split apart when it became clear that each was used distinctly and frequently enough to stand alone. Also, a few frames were added to the coding list after they appeared several times in the “other” category. These include the “radical right,” “secular humanist,” and “confusing/vague bill” frames. After some frames were combined, and some others were split apart or added, there were 27 separate frames identified in this study.

#### Graphic approach.

Lindlof said reduction of data may also involve “configuring the data in visual displays, such as data matrices and flowcharts, so that the patterns of social action can be readily grasped” (1995, p. 216). This graphic approach was used in this study to help show overall trends from the data and to illustrate changes over time in frames and sources.

An example of this approach is the frame matrix Robinson and Powell (1996) developed to illustrate competing frames in the 1991 Clarence Thomas hearings. They described the process of qualitative framing analysis:

The analytic task in framing analysis . . . consists of first identifying the major counterposed interpretive frames that exist within any given political context and then cataloging and describing the constellation of idea elements – the rhetorical motifs and submotifs – within each of these identified frames. Essentially this amounts to a Geertzian exercise in the excavation of layers of political meaning . . . (p. 282).

Since Robinson and Powell (1996) used a qualitative framing approach for their study, it seemed appropriate to use a similar frame matrix model to organize and summarize the frames used in this study. An interview with Jon

Crisp, one of the political advocates involved in the 1996 legislative debate, reinforced that approach.

Crisp, who was then director of the Tennessee Christian Coalition, described a political model he called “the four boxes,” which he said was developed by the late political strategist Lee Atwater. As illustrated in Figure 1, each box contains information defining the issue and outlining key frames, from the perspective of both sides in the political debate. Political campaigns use this model to assess the strengths and weaknesses of political positions or candidates and help develop campaign strategies.

**Figure 1.**

The Four Boxes – A Model for Political Strategy Development.

How my organization defines itself and the issue	How my opponents define themselves and the issue
How I define my opponents	How my opponents define me

Note. This political strategy model, as described by Jon Crisp, is very similar in concept and format to the frame matrix used by Robinson and Powell (1996) to provide an overview of the competing reality frames in the Clarence Thomas/ Anita Hill judicial hearings for their qualitative framing analysis of that event.

The objective of this political exercise, Crisp said, is to “expand your windowpane and shrink theirs. . . . Basically, if I’m successful, I squeeze the sides of their box . . . and I make my box pretty large. So I’ve got the whole world believing what I want them to believe about me . . . I’m getting all the press. That’s the way it works; that’s the way we fight each other. We’re constantly trying to expand our area of influence” (personal communication, Aug. 20, 1998).

#### Theory triangulation.

As discussed in the literature review, several theoretical perspectives will be applied to this data. These include: framing as a negotiation over meaning conducted among social movements and the media (e.g., Carey, 1989; Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993); the use of “interpretive packages” and resonance in public policy debates (e.g., Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Petersen & Markle, 1989); the value of mapping how issues are articulated and how meaning is constructed (e.g., Hansen, 1991; Robinson & Powell, 1996); and how a social movement’s power position affects its interactions with the media (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Petersen & Markle, 1989).

#### Summary

This thesis combined quantitative and qualitative approaches to answer research questions relating to the framing and news coverage of the 1996 legislative debate on teaching evolution. Its focus was to determine which frames dominated the news coverage of this debate, which side was more successful in framing the issue in terms of its own worldviews, and who framed this debate.

To accomplish this, the researcher mapped how this issue was articulated and how meaning was constructed. The researcher also looked for similarities among issue advocates' interactions with the news media in this debate, relating to their political and social power positions, to those reported in studies of other political debates. Overall, the researcher's objective was, specifically, to understand how and why the bill's opponents prevailed in this debate, and, generally, to develop a better understanding of the role of framing and issue advocacy in public debates on controversial issues.

This thesis contributes to the field of mass communications study by building on existing communications theory and recent academic studies relating to framing and political communication, the social construction of reality, and how social movements and the news media interact. It also illustrates the advantages (and perhaps some of the disadvantages) of combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to communication research.

## Findings

The findings of this study are based on data from newspaper framing analysis and from qualitative sources, including focused interviews with key participants in and observers of the legislative debate and audiotapes of the legislative debate.

This section begins with an overview of the findings to the research questions posed by this study. This is followed by an overview of the major frame categories and identification of dominant news frames and significant trends that emerged from the data. The findings are further developed through a chronological review of how this legislative debate was framed in the newspapers studied, focusing on data related to the research questions.

### Overview of the Findings

The research questions for this study asked which frames dominated the news coverage of this debate; how the debate was framed, and by whom; if popular cultural symbols or social values were used to create resonances and promote each side's views of the issue; and which side in this debate held the political/cultural power position in this debate.

Except in the opening week of the legislative debate, the frame analysis showed that negative frames (those opposing the legislation) dominated the news coverage of this debate in the four newspapers studied. The debate was largely framed by several key Tennessee legislators and political advocates. They included the bill's sponsors, a liberal senator from Memphis, the chair of the Senate Education Committee, and lobbyists for the Tennessee Education Association (TEA), the Tennessee chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and the Tennessee Christian Coalition (TCC).



Both sides attempted to use popular cultural symbols and social values to create resonances supporting their perspectives on this issue. For example, the bill's proponents used the concept of equal time, which draws upon the social values of fairness and equality, in support of the bill. They also used the Bible as a cultural symbol of the rightness of their cause.

The bill's opponents used the social values of progress and local control in their arguments against the bill. They also took full advantage of the "monkey bill" nickname, with its connotations of low intelligence and foolishness, to ridicule the legislation.

The bill's sponsors, Rep. Zane Whitson and Sen. Tommy Burks, acted as though they held the power position in this debate. From a legal point of view, this approach was questionable since prior high court rulings put their bill on shaky ground. Culturally, however, their dominant power approach was reasonable since the state of Tennessee has a well-deserved reputation as a secure notch in the nation's Bible Belt.

For the most part, then, the bill's sponsors attempted to limit the scope of the debate and did not actively seek allies. For example, Jon Crisp, then director of the TCC, said the bill's sponsors did not consult with the TCC prior to the bill's introduction or seek their help in getting it passed. However, this "oversight" was likely due, at least in part, to the TCC's support of a Republican challenger to Rep. Whitson in the upcoming primary election. In fact, several people interviewed for this study suggested that Whitson's main motive in sponsoring the evolution teaching bill was to shore up his own conservative credentials so he would be better positioned to withstand a primary challenge from his party's right wing.

The bill's opponents, on the other hand, acted from the low-power position. Two senators and the ACLU and TEA lobbyists worked to broaden the terms of the debate. In particular, the ACLU and TEA lobbyists actively sought to involve other groups as allies in the debate. For example, Hedy Weinberg, director of the Tennessee ACLU, said her organization strategized about ways to portray or frame the legislation that would encourage different groups to speak out against it.

### Overview of the News Coverage and Coding

Senate Bill 3229, the 1996 evolution bill, was debated in the Tennessee legislature for approximately eight weeks. It was introduced February 8, 1996, and voted down on March 28, 1996. During these two months, 62 news articles, features, editorials, and other commentary relating to the legislation appeared in the four newspapers studied. All were coded for news frames and the sources of those frames, in addition to other salient coding categories such as the type of article, its placement, and its tone.

As indicated in Table 2, news coverage of this issue peaked in week 4. This was when the bill was considered by the full Senate, after having been approved by the Senate education committee. At this point, all parties involved in the debate -- including the news media -- began taking the bill more seriously.

In particular, it is interesting to note the change over time in the overall tone of the news coverage. The tone of the first week of coverage was neutral -- neither favorable nor unfavorable toward the bill. After that, the tone of the news coverage gradually became more negative, except for a slight moderation in week 5, until the legislation was voted down in week 8.

**Table 2****Overview of the Volume and Tone of News Coverage**

<b>Variable</b>	<b><u>Week 1/2</u></b>	<b><u>Week 3</u></b>	<b><u>Week 4</u></b>	<b><u>Week 5</u></b>	<b><u>Week 6</u></b>	<b><u>Week 7</u></b>	<b><u>Week 8</u></b>
Word Counts	1,030	2,594	12,684	5,026	2,997	4,157	4,636
No. of Articles	3	5	22	10	5	6	10
Tone <sup>a</sup> (average)	3.3	3.4	3.7	3.5	4.2	4.0	3.8 <sup>b</sup>
No. Editorials & Columns	0	0	6	1	2	1	1
Tone <sup>a</sup> of editorials	N/A	N/A	4.7	5	5	4	3 <sup>b</sup>

**Note.** Weeks 1 and 2 are combined since only three articles appeared during this period and all focused generally on the bill's introduction.

<sup>a</sup> The overall tone of each article was ranked on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is strongly favorable toward the legislation, 2 is favorable, 3 is neither favorable nor unfavorable, 4 is unfavorable, and 5 is strongly unfavorable.

<sup>b</sup> In week 8, following the bill's defeat, its opponents became somewhat magnanimous and more neutral in tone.

In the four newspapers studied, negative or “con” news frames (those unfavorable to the bill) dominated the news coverage of this legislation in all but the first week. As shown below in Table 3, and in Figure 1, negative frames outnumbered positive or “pro” frames (those favoring the bill) by a nearly 3-1 margin. Mixed frames – those that were more neutral or that were used by both sides – also slightly outnumbered positive frames. The majority of mixed frames came from reporters providing background information on the 1925 Scopes trial as context for the 1996 debate. Much of that information was presented in Weeks 4 and 5, after the bill was passed out of the education committee and sent to the full Senate for consideration.

**Table 3**  
**Frames Predominating in the News Coverage**

Frame Category	Weeks							Totals
	1 & 2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
Pro frames (favorable)	6	9	42	11	1	7	9	84
Con frames (unfavorable)	5	17	99	34	22	30	33	240
Mixed frames (neither/both)	5	3	43	14	6	6	24	101
Totals	16	29	184	59	29	43	65	425

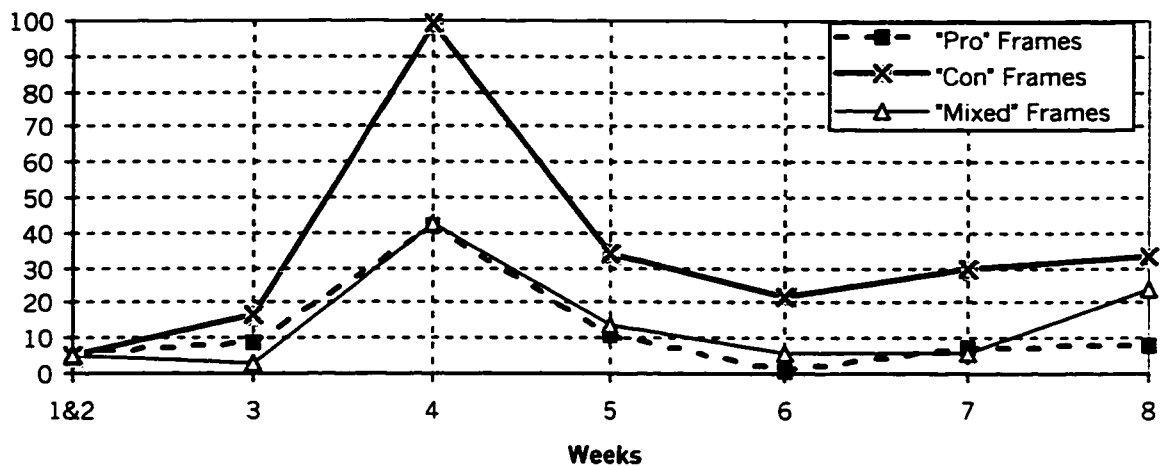
Note. Weeks 1 and 2 were combined since only three articles appeared during this period and all focused generally on the evolution bill’s introduction.

Figure 2

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 Week-by-Week Graph of Pro, Con, and Mixed News Frames
 

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Note. In the four newspapers studied, a total of 425 frames were used in the news coverage of and editorializing about this issue. The number of frames peaked - along with the number of articles published - in Week 4, which had 184 frames.

Not surprisingly, news sources showed a similar trend. Except during the first two weeks of news coverage, significantly more opponents than proponents of the bill were quoted in the newspapers studied. Overall, "con" news sources (those opposing the bill) outnumbered "pro" news sources (those favoring the bill) by nearly 3-1. Even when source comparisons were limited to those cited in news and feature articles (omitting editorials and other opinion pieces, which were largely negative), reporters referenced approximately two-thirds more "con" than "pro" sources on this issue.

This predominance of opposing sources and negative frames could indicate any of a number of things, including: a liberal bias in the press; a lack of

grassroots support for the bill; inadequate political strategy, organization, and commitment on the part of the bill's sponsors; or the superior political strategy, organization, and commitment of the bill's opponents. In this case, it appears that the dominance of negative news frames and news sources was at least in part due to the superior organization, strategy, and coalition-building efforts of the bill's opponents.

The findings of the newspaper framing analysis, combined with qualitative data from interviews with the legislators, lobbyists, and reporters who were involved in this debate, indicate how this issue was framed and by whom. The data clearly show that con frames dominated the newspaper coverage of this debate, and indicate that the bill's opponents did a better job of framing this issue in terms of their worldviews. The data also indicate which side in this debate was working from the political/cultural power position in its dealings with the media and the legislature, and which side was not. Finally, the findings show how and why the 1996 evolution bill was defeated in the Tennessee legislature.

### Overview of News Frames

The researcher initially identified 26 separate frames used to describe this legislation during the course of the debate. A total of 425 frames were identified and coded in the 62 articles reviewed for this study.

### Frame Classification

Frames were classified two ways: by number of references and by attitude toward the proposed legislation. According to the total number of references they received in the articles surveyed, frames were classified as dominant (31-40 references), major (21-30), moderate (11-20), or minor (5-10).

Any frame with less than five references was coded as “other” (see Appendix E for list of “other” frames).

Frames that were favorable toward the legislation were classified as pro” while those that were unfavorable toward the legislation were classified as “con.” Those that were neither favorable nor unfavorable, or that were used by both sides in the debate, were classified as “mixed” frames. In total, there were 13 unfavorable or con frames, eight favorable or pro frames, and five mixed frames including the “other” category.

#### Dominant and major frames.

As shown in Table 3, the Scopes/history frame (40 references), the monkey bill frame (39), and the state’s image frame (33) each received more than 30 mentions, making them the dominant frames in this debate. Three frames received 21 to 30 references each, putting them in the major frame category. They are: right-wing politics (27), unconstitutional (27), and intimidate teachers (24). There were also a total of 25 references tallied in the “other” category. All the dominant and major frames were unfavorable – that is, they opposed the proposed bill to restrict the teaching of evolution.

#### Moderate and minor frames.

Eight frames fell in the moderate category with 11 to 20 references each. They are: “not a fact” (19); morals/values/truth (19); mandate/local control (16); evolution vs. creationism/science vs. religion (16); ridicule of the bill (15); agriculture/micro-macro evolution (11); education (11); and protecting children (11). Eleven frames had 5 to 10 references, putting them in the minor frame category. Minor frames included God/Bible (10), equal time (9); cost (9), confusing bill (9), and Christian rights (7).

**Table 3****Frames by Category<sup>a</sup>, Listed in Order of (Number) of References**

<b><u>Con Frames (240)</u></b>	<b><u>Pro Frames (84)</u></b>	<b><u>Mixed Frames (101)</u></b>
<b><u>Dominant Frames (31-40)</u></b>		
Monkey bill (39)		Scopes/history (40)
State's image (33)		
<b><u>Major Frames (21-30)</u></b>		
Right-wing politics (27)		"Other" frames (25)
Unconstitutional (27)		
Intimidate teachers (24)		
<b><u>Moderate Frames (11-20)</u></b>		
Mandate/local control (17)	Morals/values/truth (20)	Evolution vs. Biblical Creationism (16)
Ridicule of the bill (15)	"Not a fact" (19)	
Education (11)	Protect children (12)	
Agriculture & micro-macro evolution (11)		
<b><u>Minor Frames (5-10)</u></b>		
Confusing bill (10)	Equal time (9)	God/Bible (10)
Cost (9)	Christian rights (7)	Theory (10)
Radical right (8)	"It's a serious bill" (7)	
Evolution/science (8)	Secular/atheists (5)	
	Overzealous teachers (5)	

**Note:** A total of 425 frames were identified in the 62 articles included in this study.

<sup>a</sup> Frames were categorized by their attitude toward the legislation. "Con" frames were unfavorable (or opposed) to the evolution bill; "pro" frames favored (or supported) the bill; and mixed frames were either neutral or those that were used by both sides in the debate.



“Con” frames.

The most influential frames used by those who opposed the legislation were: the monkey bill frame (39 references), which derisively labeled and linked the 1996 bill to the original 1925 monkey law; the state’s image frame (33), which asserted the legislature’s consideration of this bill was making the state look foolish and would hinder its economic development efforts; the right-wing politics frame (27), which alleged the bill was either the result of religious conservatives throwing their political weight around, or that it was intended to win favor with religious conservatives; the unconstitutional frame, which said the bill was trying to circumvent the separation of church and state; and the intimidate teachers frame (24), which described the bill as an attempt to intimidate teachers into avoiding the topic of evolution altogether.

“Pro” frames.

The frames most frequently used by the bill’s supporters were: the morals/values/truth (20) frame and the “not a fact” frame (19). The morals frame asserts that the bill is really about morals, values, and telling the truth. The “truth” part of the morals frame also relates to the other frequently used “pro” frame, the “not a fact” frame. This frame asserted that evolution is a theory not a fact. These frames were sometimes used together, as when the bill’s supporters said teachers should tell students the truth, which is that evolution is not a fact.

The morals/values/truth frame was also sometimes combined with the protect children frame (12), which posited that children are easily influenced, and should be protected from exposure to misinformation that could damage their moral development.

Another somewhat significant frame used by those who supported the legislation was the equal time frame (9), which argued that it was unfair that the *theory* of evolution could be taught while the teaching of the *theory* of creationism was prohibited. This frame was introduced by a spokesman for the Tennessee Christian Coalition.

#### Mixed frames.

Frames categorized as mixed did not clearly support or oppose the legislation. This category also contains frames that were used by both sides in this debate, including some that could be interpreted as either supporting or opposing the legislation, depending upon the reader's point of view.

The Scopes/history frame (40 references), which refers to the 1925 Scopes trial and the history of the evolution debate, was classified as a mixed frame because it was most often used by reporters to provide context and background for news stories on this issue. However, for many people the Scopes trial carries a negative connotation, since they think it saddled the state for decades with a backward (hicks/rubes) image.

Another mixed frame, the evolution/creationism frame (16), was also used to provide context for this debate. It discussed the basis of conflicts between the theory of evolution and biblical creationism, and also between science and religion.

Two other mixed frames, the theory frame (10) and the God/Bible frame (10), were used by both sides in this debate. Because of this joint usage, these frames tended to cancel each other out, and thus they were not very effective for either side.

Table 4 offers a snapshot view of the competing frames in this debate.

Table 4

Competing Reality Frames in the 1996 Debate on Teaching Evolution

PRO Frames (The Bill's Supporters) <i>"It's about values"</i>	CON Frames (The Bill's Opponents) <i>"It makes us look foolish"</i>
<p><u>What they said about the bill:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It's about morals, values, and the truth</li> <li>It's about teaching evolution as a theory, not a fact</li> <li>It's about protecting children</li> <li>It's about equal time and fairness</li> <li>It's about stopping overzealous teachers</li> <li>It's about the rights of Christian parents to have a say in education</li> </ul>	<p><u>What they said about the bill:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It's damaging the state's image and threatening the state's economy</li> <li>It's ridiculous, Neanderthal, and a throwback to the 1920s</li> <li>It's about right-wing politics</li> <li>It's unconstitutional</li> <li>It's about intimidating teachers</li> <li>It's a state mandate</li> <li>It would cost too much</li> <li>It's confusing</li> </ul>
<p><u>What they said about the other side:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>They're non-believers</li> <li>They're secular humanists and atheists</li> <li>They're promoting the religion of secular humanism in our classrooms</li> <li>They're trying to impose their beliefs on our children</li> </ul>	<p><u>What they said about the other side:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>They're radical, right-wing Christian conservatives</li> <li>They're interfering with local control of public schools</li> <li>They're trying to bring religion into our classrooms</li> <li>They're trying to impose their beliefs on our children</li> </ul>

### Chronology of Legislative Activity & News Coverage

Senate Bill 3229, the evolution teaching bill, was introduced in the Tennessee Senate by Sen. Tommy Burks on Feb. 8, 1996. A companion bill, House Bill 2972, was introduced in the House by Rep. Zane Whitson.

The first news coverage came the following day, Feb. 9, when *The Tennessean* and *Herald Citizen* ran articles on the bill's introduction. Both articles compared the evolution bill to the state's 1925 monkey law, setting the underlying tone for much of the future discussion of the bill. These articles also set another more short-lived precedent: both quoted more people who favored the bill than opposed to it. This was the only week when "pro" news sources outnumbered "con" news sources in the four newspapers studied.

Although the first two articles focused on the evolution bill itself, over the next two weeks the evolution bill was sometimes lumped together with two other morals bills under debate in the Tennessee legislature. One was the Ten Commandments resolution, which would have required posting the Ten Commandments in the state's public buildings. It had already attracted national media attention. A third morals bill proposed banning same-sex marriage. An example is the article, "Religious overtones enter the Tenn. legislature," which appeared Feb. 16 in the *Commercial Appeal*.

### The Turning Point

The evolution bill got its first hearing in the Senate education committee in the third week after its introduction, on Feb. 21, 1996. Several senators raised concerns about how well the bill was written, since it did not clearly define evolution or include any mention of providing due process for teachers accused of teaching evolution as fact. In fact, Sen. Roscoe Dixon commented that it was

“not even grammatically correct” (Tennessee Senate Education Committee, 1996, Feb. 21). In spite of these concerns, the bill was approved 8-1 by the education committee and sent to the full Senate for its consideration. The lone dissenting vote came from committee chairman Sen. Andy Womack.

The fourth newspaper in this study, the *News Sentinel*, began its coverage of this legislation at the end of week 3, on Feb. 25, with an article covering both morals bills. Since the Ten Commandments resolution was sponsored by Sen. Ben Atchley of Knoxville, the *News Sentinel* initially focused on it.

After the evolution bill’s approval by the Senate education committee, “con” news frames and sources began to edge out “pro” news frames and sources in the newspapers studied. This trend began in week 3, as reporters wrote about the bill’s initial passage, and accelerated in week 4, as the bill was taken up by the full Senate. During weeks 3 and 4, six new “con” frames appeared while only one new “pro” frame appeared.

#### News Coverage Peaks

News coverage of this legislation peaked in week 4, with the four newspapers studied running 22 articles on it. For comparison, during the first three weeks, the four newspapers ran eight articles on this issue. During the last four weeks the issue was under debate, they ran 31 articles on it.

#### The editorials begin.

Week 4 was also when editorial writers and columnists began to address this issue. During week 4, for example, the *News Sentinel* and *The Tennessean* ran six opinion pieces on this issue: four editorials and two columns. Five of them strongly opposed the bill; the fifth one was a fairly neutral column by *The Tennessean’s* religion editor that discussed why evolution is viewed as such a

threat by religious conservatives and how religious liberals could better position themselves in public debates about social values (Waddle, 1996, March 3, p. 2D).

The other two newspapers studied did not print any editorials or columns on this issue, although the *Herald Citizen* did print a local church advertorial which featured the minister's comments in support of the bill and labeled its opponents "atheists" (Hill, 1996, March 1).

Of the 11 opinion pieces that appeared on this topic during the course of the legislative debate, nine strongly opposed the legislation and two were neutral, focusing on the issues behind the debate. There were no editorials in favor of the legislation. Some of the bill's opponents told the researcher that they thought the editorials played a role in its defeat.

For example, Sen. Steve Cohen attributed the bill's defeat to "the public debate in the newspapers, and the strong commentary . . . saying this was going to make us a laughingstock." He continued, "There were dozens of editorials nationally . . . suggesting Tennessee was being made [into] another Scopes trial, and other Mencken-type commentary on the state. It was embarrassing" (Cohen, personal communication, Aug. 18, 1998).

### The Second Half

During the final four weeks of the legislative debate, from March 4-31, "con" news frames outnumbered "pro" frames in the newspapers studied. In week 5, for example, there were 34 "con" frames to 11 "pro" frames. In weeks 6 and 7, it was 22 to 1 and 30 to 7, respectively. And in week 8, when the bill was again brought up for a vote in the Senate education committee and finally defeated, there were 33 "con" frames to 8 "pro" frames. In week 8, mixed frames also significantly outnumbered "pro" frames, as the winners in the debate turned

magnanimous and as reporters recapped the 1996 legislative debate and compared it to the 1925 Scopes trial.

### Framing the Debate

Several significant themes in this debate were introduced in the first two weeks of news coverage. The bill's sponsors, Sen. Tommy Burks and Rep. Zane Whitson, established five frames when they introduced the bill. They asserted the legislation was needed because "overzealous teachers" were telling impressionable children that evolution is a proven fact, even though it is "just a theory, not a fact." They also asserted that the proposed legislation would be constitutional, since it did not actually ban the teaching of evolution, just the teaching of evolution as a fact.

Asked by a reporter to comment on the bill, John Hannah, chairman emeritus of the Tennessee Christian Coalition (TCC), introduced the equal time frame. He asserted that it was unfair to allow the theory of evolution to be taught if the theory of biblical creation could not also be taught.

Hedy Weinberg, director of the Tennessee ACLU, was the first person to speak out against the bill. She characterized it as an attempt to "intimidate teachers" into avoiding the topic of evolution in their classrooms. Raising the Scopes/history frame, she said, "I would certainly hope that the Monkey Trial, as it was referred to in the '20s, is not played out again in Tennessee in 1996" (Cheek, 1996, Feb. 9). That same *Tennessean* article also cited other critics of the bill as saying it had all the makings of a modern-day Monkey Law, introducing what quickly became the monkey bill frame.

### History's Influence

It was inevitable that the bill's opponents would compare the 1996

evolution bill to the state's 1925 monkey law, and the 1996 legislative debate to 1925 Scopes trial. So it was no surprise that the Scopes/history frame, at 40 references, was the most frequently used frame in this debate. It was also the only one that appeared in every week of the debate.

The prevalence of this frame indicates the strong influence of the state's history on the 1996 debate. Unfortunately for the bill's supporters, the Scopes/history frame carried negative connotations for many people. The highly publicized 1925 Scopes trial gave the state of Tennessee, and much of the South, a lingering image as an uneducated backwater. The popular 1950s film, "Inherit the Wind," further reinforced that image.

Although the Scopes/history frame was introduced by the bill's opponents, it was included in the mixed frame category because it was primarily used by reporters when providing background or contextual information on the history of the evolution debate in Tennessee.

#### Sons of Scopes.

The negative connotations of the Scopes/history frame provided a foundation for several news frames that were unfavorable to the bill, including the monkey bill, state's image, and ridicule frames. These frames were both complementary and synergistic. All three suggested that the 1996 evolution bill, like the 1925 monkey law, was foolish and would make the state look backwards.

The monkey bill frame's usage peaked in weeks 4 and 5, with 17 and 8 references, respectively. The state's image frame first appeared in week 3; it also peaked in weeks 4 and 5, with 15 and 7 references, respectively. The ridicule frame began in week 4, with four references, and continued at about that level. These three frames persisted until the legislation was defeated.



### Drawing Media Attention

The state's image and ridicule frames were fueled by the national and international media attention the evolution bill received. The *Commercial Appeal* news article that quoted Sen. Steve Cohen in week 2 also laid the groundwork for the state's image frame, which appeared the following week, when it noted that the evolution bill had "made national news, much to the chagrin of many legislators" (Wade, 1996, Feb. 16).

Two days after the bill was passed out of the education committee and sent to the full Senate, *The New York Times* published an article that focused on the Ten Commandments bill but also briefly discussed the evolution bill (Applebaum, 1996, Feb. 23). The media frenzy had begun. As the ACLU's Hedy Weinberg noted,

You had the BBC down here; you had Russian stations and Australian stations calling all of us and the legislators for comments . . . and all over the country you had the media talking to legislators about what this bill was about and what the impact was. And I think the legislators - certainly the leaders in the House and Senate - began to understand that this could have a greater impact than they realized, and that they had to get hold of it. (personal communication, Aug. 7, 1998)

Nationally, for example, *The Christian Science Monitor* (Spaid, 1996, March 8) and *The New York Times* (Applebaum, 1996, March 10) published front-page news articles on conservative Christians' renewed efforts to have creationism taught in the public schools, using the Tennessee bill as an example. *USA Today* also ran a feature article on the bill (Curley, 1996, March 27). An editorial in *The Tennessean* noted that the *ABC Nightly News* and *The Today Show* had recently reported on the actions of the Tennessee legislature. The editorial writer expressed concern that "if the bill becomes law, the jesting and national jokes

about Tennessee and its lawmakers will surely escalate" ("Inherit the wind," 1996, March 3).

Dealing with the media.

Rep. Whitson was surprised by the amount of media attention the bill received. "I was amazed," he said. "I got calls from all over the world on it" (personal communication, July 31, 1998).

Initially, Whitson was receptive to doing interviews with the national news media. For example, he interviewed with Peter Jennings of ABC-TV, who he described as "very fair and even-handed" in his coverage of the bill. However, Whitson said the bill's opponents and some reporters "kind of made a mockery of it. It was the Monkey Bill all over again. I think they were unfair in playing it up as the Scopes thing" (personal communication, Aug. 21, 1998). Whitson said the media's continued ridicule of the bill eventually prompted him to avoid giving interviews.

The bill's co-sponsor, Sen. Burks, generally avoided talking to the national news media from the start. *News Sentinel* reporter Mayshark offered a possible explanation for his reticence. Noting that "the legislators who sponsored the bill . . . were not terribly articulate guys," Mayshark said he thought Burks' avoidance of the national news media may have been due to his concerns that they would not be sympathetic to his point of view and he "might come off looking like a southern hillbilly legislator" (personal communication, July 31, 1998).

Using the media.

The bill's opponents, on the other hand, benefited from the national and international media attention the bill attracted. In fact, they used that news

coverage to bolster the credibility of the state's image and ridicule frames, and to create concern about the bill's potential impact on the state's economy. As the ACLU's Weinberg commented,

It kind of worked to our advantage that we had more media coverage, which allowed us the luxury of using those arguments . . . that this is going to affect the business community, that Tennessee is going to become a laughingstock, [and that] 70 years later we're still fighting the same battle. . . . There's no question that the major media attention that we got, for good or bad, influenced some of the legislators' votes. (personal communication, Aug. 7, 1998)

By highlighting the national media attention to the bill, its opponents successfully leveraged the existing public discomfort with the state's lingering "country bumpkin" image by portraying the 1996 evolution bill as a step backwards. One editorial cartoon capsulized that theme. Headlined, "The evolution of the Tennessee general assembly," it showed a man devolving into an ape, with the caption, "'Course, this is just a theory, class" (Campbell, 1996, March 3).

### The Role of Politics

In week 2, Sen. Steve Cohen, D-Memphis, introduced the right-wing politics frame when he told a reporter he thought the Religious Right was behind both the evolution bill and the Ten Commandments bill. This frame played off concerns that religious conservatives want to impose their beliefs on others. However, TCC chairman Jon Crisp responded that the increase in religion-oriented bills was due not so much to activism on the part of religious conservatives, but to a fundamental political shift brought about by the Republican landslide in the 1994 elections. Crisp added, "I'm glad legislators are starting to listen to their constituencies" (Cheek, 1996, Feb. 27).

A state representative predicted the evolution bill would “fly out” of the house education committee, commenting, “There are those members who are in favor of this . . . there are others who are afraid of it. And they are both going to vote for it” (Cheek, 1996, Feb. 27).

### The Bill’s Opponents Mobilize

By week 3, when the bill was approved by the Senate Education Committee, its opponents had begun to mobilize. They introduced five new frames – including the state’s image frame, which became a dominant frame, and the unconstitutional frame, which became a major frame. The bill’s supporters generated just one new frame, the morals/values/truth frame.

Early in the week, before the education committee discussed the bill, Sen. Cohen initiated the state’s image frame by saying this type of legislation “gives Tennessee a bad name . . . (and) makes us look foolish to the rest of the country” (Cheek, 1996, Feb. 20). As *News Sentinel* reporter Mayshark commented,

The people opposed to [the bill] were much more effective . . . in broadening the issue to this whole question of Tennessee’s standing as part of the “New South” and as a progressive state. (personal communication, July 31, 1998)

The state’s image frame became one of three dominant frames in the debate, and many felt it was one of the reasons for the bill’s defeat.

Sen. Womack said, “I think one of the strong factors [in the bill’s defeat] was the fact that our state has been through this once before . . . and it had not put our state in a complimentary light. The articles which were appearing nationally about the resurrection of this issue were putting somewhat of a negative cloud over our state . . .” (personal communication, Aug. 17, 1998). *Commercial Appeal* Reporter Paula Wade said she was “absolutely certain” the

bill's defeat was largely due to the "potential for international, public humiliation" if it passed (personal communication, Aug. 14, 1998).

The unconstitutional frame was previewed in week 3 when a reporter mentioned prior court decisions to strike down laws restricting the teaching of evolution. In week 4 it made a big splash as State Attorney General Charles Burson issued his opinion that the bill was unconstitutional. Weinberg echoed that opinion, noting that the ACLU had already received calls from teachers wanting to challenge the bill and become the next John Scopes.

Also in week 3, Weinberg framed the bill's supporters as "radicals" when she said, "This (legislation) is clearly political and it's coming from the radical religious right" (Wade, 1996, Feb. 28).

By the end of week 3, negative frames outnumbered positive frames by a 2-to-1 margin.

#### Local control.

After the bill was passed out of the education committee over his objections, Sen. Womack publicly voiced his concerns about the issue of local control, noting the bill put the legislature in the position of setting school curriculums. This quickly evolved into the mandate/local control frame, which effectively co-opted both the language and the symbolism of political conservatives, who had made local control and unfunded federal mandates a campaign issue in the 1994 election cycle. This framing allowed Womack, the TEA, and others opposing the evolution bill to voice their objections to it in the more acceptable terms of dictating curriculum and state mandates.

This frame received several mentions in week 4, faded in weeks 5 and 6, but re-emerged as a significant theme in the last two weeks of the debate.

### The Values Frames

In weeks 3 and 4 the bill's supporters attempted to regain control of the debate by redefining the issue. The legislation, they said, was about morals, about values, about the truth, and about protecting children. In many ways, the morals/values/truth frame and the protect children frame were the flip side of the intimidate teachers and right-wing politics frames.

#### It's about protecting children.

When he introduced the legislation, Rep. Whitson stated that protecting children was one of his main reasons for sponsoring the bill. This frame disappeared for the next two weeks, then came back to life in week 4 when Whitson testified that the bill was needed to protect impressionable children from being force-fed misinformation about evolution.

Sen. Burks also used the values frames extensively. As reported in *The Tennessean*, "Burks said the bill is needed because the family foundation is crumbling and there is often no parent at home to provide guidance to a student who has been taught evolution as fact" (Cheek, 1996, Feb. 22).

Burks elaborated on the "truth" part of this frame in an interview which was featured on the front page of his local newspaper, the *Herald Citizen*. He said, "It's actually about the truth. . . . And I think it's important that they teach kids the truth - that evolution is not fact, but theory" (Denton, 1996, Feb. 29).

*Tennessean* Religion Editor Ray Waddle also focused on the morals/values/truth frame in an article titled, "Bill's backers: Morality the issue." Waddle described the bill as "the latest in a line of conservative attempts to dislodge what supporters see as secular domination of public life and education." He quoted some local Christian Coalition members on their reasons

for supporting for the bill, adding, “Supporters . . . say its passage would still be a victory for traditional morality” (Waddle, 1996, March 2).

### On the Defensive

In week 4, the bill’s opponents introduced four new frames, and its supporters introduced three new frames. On the “con” side, the ridicule, education, confusing bill, and evolution/science frames were introduced. On the “pro” side, the Christian rights, “it’s a serious bill,” and atheists/secular humanists frames were introduced.

The ridicule frame was influential in this debate because it put the bill’s supporters on the defensive. The new “pro” frames were mostly defensive, introduced by the bill’s two sponsors in response to the growing success of several negative frames. In one of these frames, Rep. Whitson insisted that Christian parents have rights too; in another, Sen. Burks insisted that the evolution bill was not a joke and should be taken seriously.

The third new “pro” frame, the secular humanists/atheists frame, was more offensive in nature (pun intended). It attempted to label the bill’s opponents as secular humanists or atheists - essentially, as non-believers - and thus put them at a disadvantage in a state where many residents are conservative Christians.

In fairness, however, this frame may also have been introduced, at least in part, in response to the radical right frame. This frame, which labeled the bill’s supporters as right-wingers or as part of the radical right, first appeared in week 3. Its use intensified in week 4.

### Ridicule sets in.

The ridicule frame first appeared February 26 in an editorial in the

*Tennessean*. It decried both the evolution and Ten Commandments bills as “crude Neanderthal legislation.” The editorial commented, “By passing a new Monkey Bill and endorsing the Ten Commandments, Tennessee lawmakers are giving the entire state an image of hicks, rubes and yokels” (“Tennessee lawmakers,” 1996, Feb. 26).

This was followed by the first appearance of the “serious bill” frame on February 28 in the *News Sentinel*. The serious frame also appeared in news articles in *The Tennessean* on March 1 and 2, while the ridicule frame appeared in commentary in the *News Sentinel* on those same days.

For example, in a news article headlined, “Nothing funny in ‘monkey law,’ sponsor insists,” Sen. Burks said he had received calls from television networks and other national news media about the bill. He complained that “the news media have had a lot of fun with it. It is serious legislation from my standpoint” (Cheek, 1996, March 1).

In week 5, a news article in *The Tennessean* read: “Sen. Steve Cohen and other critics of the legislation say it is making Tennessee a laughingstock” (Cheek, 1996, March 5). The next day, Rep. Whitson countered that the state was not being made into a laughingstock, and that he had introduced the bill on behalf of Christians. Whitson said, “If people think the state should be embarrassed because of Christians, they should think again,” (“Monkey bill pulled,” 1996, March 6).

As the debate wore on, some newspaper columnists and a few reporters used humorous headlines and leads. This approach brought complaints from some of the legislators interviewed.



“I think the media reported on it more as entertainment than they did as legislation,” said Sen. Womack. “I didn’t feel it was really treated with in-depth coverage as an issue” (personal communication, Aug. 17, 1998).

*Commercial Appeal* reporter Paula Wade said in some ways news coverage of the bill was more of a media discussion than a political debate. She said,

The media really was a whole lot more interested in it . . . just because of the novelty of it, and because of the weird nature of it, and the joke potential maybe. The [Jay] Leno quotient was very high. . . . It was just such a fun story, who could resist? (personal communication, Aug. 14, 1998)

The emergence of the state’s image and ridicule frames may have contributed to the introduction of another defensive frame, the Christian rights frame, in week 4. This frame was typified by Whitson’s comment in defense of the evolution bill: “Christian parents have rights. We live in a religious free country and those of us who believe in Christianity want our children to be able to think for themselves” (Cheek, 1996, Feb. 28).

#### Getting an education.

The education frame started late, in week 4, and persisted at a low level through the last week of the debate. However, for the bill’s opponents it represented a successful broadening of the debate and a mobilization of new groups against the bill.

The three metro newspapers interviewed area teachers and professors about the bill’s potential impact on education. Two of the newspapers studied ran articles when area university faculty members spoke out against the bill. The other two newspapers in this study covered a noted biologist’s speech on evolution – including his strong criticism of creationism – at the University of

Tennessee. *The Tennessean's* first editorial against the bill focused on education but also touched on several other "con" frames. It concluded:

The law's intent has nothing to do with education and everything to do with winning favor from fundamentalist Christian groups. . . . This bill has no merit. It is an embarrassment. It would intimidate teachers. It violates the constitution. And it makes the Tennessee General Assembly look like a collection of rubes. The Senate - for its own sake as well as for the sake of Tennessee - should halt this political chicanery while it can. ("A Lesson From Teachers," 1996, Feb. 29)

Underlying the education frame was the concern that enacting the legislation would leave students ill-prepared for higher education and high-tech jobs, and that the reputation of the state's education system would be damaged. Those who used the education frame often linked it to the state's image frame.

"A lot of higher education campuses were very outspoken in opposition to the legislation," said Jerry Winters, lobbyist for the Tennessee Education Association. "(They) viewed it from an academic standpoint, but they were also very concerned that we did not go back 70 years to the Scopes trial. Just the reflection on the state . . . that was the concern of a lot of different people" (personal communication, Aug. 8, 1998).

Similarly, Knox County Education Association president Gary Harmon commented, "If I were in the business of economic development, I would see this as a public relations disaster." He said businesses interested in relocating to the state "are going to see this legislation as a sign that the area is too backward to consider" (Mayshark, 1996, March 4).

#### Intimidation tactics.

In conjunction with the education frame, the intimidate teachers frame also got a high number of mentions in week 4. As more educators commented

on the bill, this frame was broadened to include the issue of academic freedom. ACLU's Hedy Weinberg used this frame when she said, "The real aim of this bill is to intimidate teachers into not teaching evolution at all - out of fear for their job" (Waddle, 1996, Feb. 27).

The intimidate teachers frame received 24 references during the course of the legislative debate, making it a major frame. Each of the three metro dailies published articles focusing on the bill's potential impact on education, which featured interviews with teachers and students. After week 4, the use of this frame tapered off significantly as other frames, such as the cost frame, came to the fore.

### Minor Frames

In addition to the equal time frame, discussed previously, other minor frames included the God/Bible frame, the evolution/science frame, and the theory frame.

#### God and the Bible.

According to the numbers, the God/Bible frame, at 10 references, was a minor one in this debate. However, the social value of a shared belief in God and the cultural symbolism of the Bible formed the underpinnings of the morals/values/truth frame, and lent resonance to that frame.

"Obviously," said *News Sentinel* reporter Mayshark, "the people who were pushing for the bill were able to invoke the Bible, which I'm sure carried weight with some percentage of the population" (personal communication, July 31, 1998). *Commercial Appeal* reporter Wade added to that. She said,

One thing that happens in debates like this, particularly where there is a so-called righteous point of view, is the labeling. . . . Either you're with the ACLU, those Godless communists, or you

are with the good God-fearing believers. That's why it was so hard to kill. . . . I really do think labeling played a particularly big role in this [debate]. (personal communication, Aug. 14, 1998)

However, since the bill's sponsors tried to frame the debate as an issue of fairness and values, not religion, to avoid raising constitutional questions relating to the separation of church and state, they generally avoided focusing on God and the Bible when talking about the evolution bill. The Tennessee Christian Coalition, a politically savvy organization, also adhered to this model when discussing the bill.

Most public references to God and the Bible came in the final two weeks of the legislative debate. The first round of references came as Senate Education Committee members discussed why they had voted for or against the bill on March 20, when it was once again sent to the full Senate for consideration. The second round of references came during the final Senate vote on the bill. Several senators invoked God as they cast their votes, either saying they were voting for their bill because of their belief in God and Biblical creation, or professing their belief in God in spite of their vote against the bill.

"The people who did vote against it wanted to make *very clear* that they believed in God," said Hedy Weinberg of the ACLU. "There was a real desire on their part to say, 'I'm voting against it, but . . . know that I believe in God'" (personal communication, Aug. 8, 1998).

#### Talking about science.

The evolution/science frame began in week 4, prompted by the education committee's Feb. 27 passage of the bill. A Feb. 29 *Tennessean* article featured comments from area teachers and university professors, including one teacher who said, "Our legislators don't know enough about science to even legislate this

law" (Benavides, 1996, Feb. 29). This argument uses the ideology of expertise to defend science.

Most news sources from the science camp tended to use the philosophy of useful knowledge approach to defend the teaching of evolution. This approach emphasizes the importance of evolution to understanding biology, and stresses biology's role in advances in medicine and genetics. As Toumey (1996) noted, the philosophy of useful knowledge is easily linked to the cultural value of progress, which was a major component of the state's image frame in this debate.

Still others in the science camp tried to untangle some of the misconceptions about the theory of evolution, and the misunderstandings about how scientists define a "theory." The reporters covering this issue spent some time discussing the word "theory" and comparing its scientific meaning to its popular meaning. Their attempts to clarify the meaning of this word were undermined, to a certain extent, by both sides in this debate. The bill's supporters took advantage of the popular meaning of theory, as a guess or prediction, to attempt to co-opt the language of science and put the biblical "theory" of creation on a more equal footing with the theory of evolution. Later, some school administrators and teachers split verbal hairs and further muddied the issue by saying that since evolution was a theory they were, of course, already teaching it as a theory.

Most readers probably responded to these discussions the same way this reporter did when she commented: ". . . and then they got off into the definition of what a theory is, and at that point . . . that's when I started rolling my eyes and saying, 'Oh, when will this be over'" (Wade, personal communication, Aug. 14, 1998).

The reporters, especially *Tennessean* religion editor Ray Waddle, tried to provide context for the legislative debate by explaining the basic conflicts between evolution and biblical creationism, and more generally, between science and religion. Both the evolution/creationism frame and the theory frame were classified as mixed frames because of their contextual usage by reporters, as well as their usage by both sides in this debate.

#### Avoiding the monkey trap.

As the bill's supporters tried to avoid portraying the bill as religiously motivated, so the bill's opponents tried to avoid the monkey trap. "We did not intend to be drug into the issue of whether a man descended from a monkey," said TEA lobbyist Jerry Winters (personal communication, Aug. 5, 1998).

Senator Womack, chair of the senate education committee, took a similar approach. He said, "I tried from the very beginning not to . . . get involved in the issue of evolution itself, but to deal with it as an issue of whether the legislature should be determining what and how subjects should be taught in school. . . . I do not feel that is the legislature's job" (personal communication, Aug. 17, 1998).

#### Closing Frames

In the closing weeks of the debate, the bill's supporters resurrected one earlier frame while the bill's opponents recycled one frame and developed two new ones.

#### The return of "equal time."

The equal time frame, which got a few mentions in the first three weeks only to disappear in week 4, re-emerged in week 5 with four references. At the beginning of the week, on March 4, the legislation was referred back to the Senate Education Committee by the full Senate after legislators discussed but

declined to approve several proposed amendments. One amendment, offered by Sen. David Fowler, a conservative Republican, was based on the equal time frame. It would have allowed the teaching of all creation theories, including the biblical creationism, in addition to the theory of evolution.

Fowler said the amendment was prompted by his “frustration that, by the force of law, we allow one set of ideas to be taught and forbid another . . .” (Cheek, 1996, March 5). He argued that teaching only evolution violates the Constitution because it advances “the religion of secular humanism” (Wade, 1996, March 5).

Fowler’s attempt to frame this issue as a question of equal time drew upon the social values of fairness and equality. It could also be viewed as an attempt to move the debate out of the realm of science and education, where all viewpoints are *not* created equal, and into the realm of American culture and democratic politics, where all citizens are supposed to have an equal say. Using the concept of equal time, he attempted to frame the debate as an issue of fairness that should be decided by the public, not by experts.

At the same time, this positioning attempted to place the theory of biblical creationism on an equal footing with the theory of evolution – even though creationism has very little scientific support, while the theory of evolution has survived decades of scrutiny and is regarded by the scientific community as the foundation of modern biology. A good example of this equalizing was a comment made earlier by Sen. Burks: “They’ve made it so that we can’t teach creation in the schools, and all this (bill) is saying is that you can’t teach the theory of evolution like it’s a fact” (Wade, 1996, Feb. 22).

### The demise of equal time.

As it turned out, however, Fowler's amendment was so broadly written that it would have given Tennessee teachers the go-ahead to teach "any theory of the origins of the universe and all its components, material and immaterial, conscious and unconscious" (Cheek, 1996, March 5). One senator raised the concern that it could allow teachers to discuss Satanism. "Under this [amendment], a teacher could get up in front of children and say just anything," said Sen. Jerry Cooper. "I'm voting against the thing no matter what" (Wade, 1996, March 5). The failure of Fowler's amendment marked the last push of the equal time frame by the bill's supporters.

### Evolution and Agriculture

The agriculture/micro-macro evolution frame was introduced in week 3 but didn't catch on until weeks 7 and 8, when it was linked to the cost frame. Together, these two frames tied the bill up in knots. Sen. Womack first fielded this frame when he questioned whether the bill would prohibit the teaching of genetics and selective breeding in state college agriculture programs. Sen. Burks, a farmer, responded that he did not consider selective breeding to be the same as evolution (Wade, 1996, Feb. 22).

However, Burks later offered an amendment that defined evolution as the "unproven belief that random, undirected forces produced a world of living things" (Cheek, 1996, March 5). Burks' amendment also differentiated between macro-evolution, which he defined as the evolution of one species into another, and micro-evolution, which he defined as changes within a single species.

### It costs too much.

Adopted on March 20, the micro-macro amendment promptly created a



problem for the bill's supporters. Because existing biology textbooks did not describe evolution in terms of micro- and macro-evolution, passage of the bill with this amendment would have required the purchase of new textbooks statewide. Thus, passage of this amendment let the bill's opponents label it as a high-cost bill, and let the senate tag it with a fiscal note.

As noted in *The Tennessean*, "The General Assembly uses fiscal notes both as a way to control state budgetary costs and, informally, to scuttle bills where members don't want to cast controversial votes on the record" (Daughtrey, 1996, March 21).

The cost frame was the last significant frame introduced in this legislative debate, and one of the most decisive, since it slowed the bill's momentum and gave fence-straddling senators a plausible reason to vote against it.

It's too confusing.

Another reason to vote against the bill came when a conservative on the education committee, Sen. David Fowler, decided to vote against it. To do so, Fowler resurrected the confusing bill frame, which was originally floated in week 5 of the debate by TEA lobbyist Winters – ironically, while he was criticizing a complex amendment proposed by Fowler. In addition to being too confusing, the bill didn't go far enough because it did not ensure that creationism would be taught alongside evolution, Fowler said.

Sen. Womack commented, "Senator Fowler . . . is kind of a poster child for the Christian Right. It shocked everybody that he was not voting for it. He kind of took the tinge off [the perception] that you were not a Christian if you didn't vote for the bill" (personal communication, Aug. 17, 1998).

By the end of the debate most legislators just wanted the issue to go away, said *Commercial Appeal* reporter Paul Wade. She explained,

People were sick of it; people were afraid of looking like dolts. . . . That [it was too confusing] is the argument you can finally make - without angering the religious right or anything else - that will get you out of the box of having to vote for something like that. (Wade, personal communication, Aug. 14, 1998)

The final vote.

After considerable debate on a flurry of new amendments, the bill was defeated in the Senate on March 28, 1996, by a 20-13 vote. That margin of defeat was large enough to prevent the bill from being brought up again later in the 1996 legislative session.

Rep. Zane Whitson explained the bill's defeat in two ways. First, he said, "the people who don't believe in God" were much more vocal than the Christians were. Second, he said, "It became a controversy and that killed it." But, he added, "It was a pretty close vote."

The ACLU's Weinberg agreed that the final vote was too close for comfort. She said,

This was not a comfortable margin . . . we really thought, at times, that we were going to lose. . . . The bill was defeated because we focused clearly on the issue, and because there were so many different ways to look at the issue. Different legislators voted [against it] for different reasons. I think it was our job as lobbyists . . . to present as many sides as possible. . . . That's part of any good lobbying strategy, because different people have different reasons for supporting you. (Weinberg, personal communication, Aug. 7, 1996)

Sen. Dixon was a good example. Although he initially supported the bill, he said concerns about its implementation prompted him to change his mind. He said school officials told him it would only provoke more disputes and

contention in the public school system. In the end, Dixon likened the issue to the debate over prayer in the schools. He observed, "Everybody says it's okay to pray in school . . . as long as it's my religion" (Dixon, personal communication, Aug. 26, 1998).

*Tennessean* reporter Duren Cheek offered another take on the bill's defeat. "Well," he said, "I think most legislators came to the realization that it was really pretty silly . . . that it, indeed, put the state in a bad light, and it really didn't do anything" (Cheek, personal communication, Aug. 13, 1998).

#### Political Power & Coalitions

In large part, the evolution bill was defeated because its opponents were able to create a diverse coalition against it. As Weinberg noted, their reasons for opposing the bill varied: some coalition members focused on the bill's potential impact on the state's image and business climate, others on its constitutionality, and still others on local control of curriculum and academic freedom. As previously noted, some conservative legislators such as Sen. Fowler finally voted against the bill because they felt it did not go far enough – either in restricting the teaching of evolution or in promoting the teaching of creationism in the public schools.

#### The Media's Role

An interesting question is whether news coverage of the issue may have helped create the coalition against the bill. *Commercial Appeal* reporter Paula Wade suggested that reporters may have played a role in broadening the debate and mobilizing related groups by requesting interviews with the organizations and people that might be impacted by the bill. She said, "The debate ended up, even reluctantly, drawing groups in. I don't know whether they were brought in

by the media, but I would suspect that's how it shook out" (personal communication, August 14, 1998).

For example, news media requests for opposing viewpoints seem to have had a lot to do with the Tennessee Christian Coalition's entry into the debate. Director Jon Crisp said the TCC board of directors initially wanted to avoid taking a position on the bill because they viewed it as a "no-win situation politically." He said,

We only responded and started taking a position on it when we had to. We were getting . . . six and eight phone calls [a day] from different newspapers and radio stations . . . wanting to know our position. . . . And I wasn't about to let [the ACLU] frame the debate. (Crisp, personal communication, Aug. 20, 1998)

On the other hand, the media seemed to have played less of a role in the ACLU's involvement in the issue. Weinberg said she was aware that the evolution bill on its way to the legislature before the news media began to report on it. She also said the ACLU strategized how to deal with the bill and initiated much of the coalition-building on this issue. She said,

As the ACLU's lobbyist, when . . . some discussion about this bill surfaced, I started talking with and actually notifying a number of different groups I thought we could work in coalition with to try to defeat this bill. . . . That's the way the ACLU works . . . when we're dealing with a particular issue, (we) identify the partners we can work with in a coalition. Sometimes they're likely partners; sometimes they're unlikely partners. Clearly, in this particular issue, the Tennessee Education Association was a natural ally. I talked to lobbyists from the business community to get their take on it, and put in a call to the Chamber of Commerce. I don't know that the other side tried to build a broader coalition (beyond) the likely allies. (Weinberg, personal communication, Aug. 7, 1996)

In addition to the TEA, which represents teachers and administrators at public elementary and high schools, a number of people in higher education also

spoke out against the bill. Vanderbilt University's faculty circulated a resolution condemning the bill. Similar activism took place at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. *News Sentinel* reporter Jesse Mayshark said,

I think the local chapter of the American Association of University Professors wrote letters to all their legislators decrying it, [and] the faculty senate passed a resolution opposing the bill. They invoked every kind of organizational clout and letterhead that they could get their hands on to promote their viewpoint. (personal communication, July 31, 1998).

However, Jerry Winters of the TEA noted that although several higher education campuses and faculty senates addressed the issue, the TEA did not "go out there and try to whip up the troops on this thing. We did not go out and ask our 40,000 members to call their legislators in opposition to this. Most of the dialogue took place at the state level, at the state capitol" (personal communication, Aug. 5, 1998).

Reporters covering this debate also quoted some teachers and school administrators who favored the bill (some from private Christian schools), and some who were unconcerned about it because they thought it would have little or no impact on education. However, it did not appear that any of these individuals were actively engaged in supporting the bill.

Overall, the findings indicate that the bill's opponents tried to broaden the debate and involve third parties in the issue – actions expected of the side that does perceive itself to be holding the power position in a political debate. But, did the bill's supporters act out the power position by attempting to limit the terms of the debate? According to several of those interviewed, they did.

For example, Sen. Dixon said Sen. Burks tried to limit the debate. "Tommy wanted to keep it narrow," Dixon said (personal communication, Aug.

26, 1998). Sen. Whitson agreed, commenting, "The Christian people tried to stay focused" (personal communication, Aug. 21, 1998).

Jon Crisp said the Tennessee Christian Coalition also tried to keep the debate narrow and more focused. "We said, 'All we want is equal time and fair treatment,'" Crisp said. "We were Johnny-one-note on that'" (personal communication, Aug. 20, 1998).

Although the TCC spoke out in favor of the evolution bill, Crisp said the organization did not make it a legislative priority. Instead, he said, they were focused on other bills that were potentially more far-reaching and had a better chance of passage. "We had bigger fish to fry," Crisp said. "Welfare reform was going on . . . Families First and TennCare was a big issue with us, and we were pushing on that" (personal communication, Aug. 20, 1998).

Crisp also commented that neither of the bill's sponsors had "ever really been too friendly to the Christian Coalition . . . nobody consulted with us - not that they had to" (personal communication, Aug. 20, 1998).

Crisp said he thought the evolution bill originated with Rep. Whitson, who was facing a tough primary fight against a TCC-backed candidate and wanted to shore up his conservative credentials. Most of those interviewed said they thought Sen. Burks was motivated to co-sponsor the bill because of deeply-held religious convictions, but Sen. Dixon offered a slightly different story. He said Burks has a history of sponsoring one or two hot-button issues in every legislative session. Burks "loves the drama," Dixon said, and these kinds of bills provide him with the kind of publicity that money can't buy (personal communication, Aug. 26, 1998).

Crisp also said it was obvious that the bill's sponsors hadn't developed a strategy for the bill. "Had they thought out the end game and the political strategy of the situation, it was not a very smart move going into this fight to begin with," Crisp commented. "You pick and choose your wars.

"But," Crisp added, "whether you like it or not, if somebody drops a bill in the hopper in the legislature in Tennessee, you're along for the ride. We were all along for the ride because somebody wanted to look good in his re-election primary" (Crisp, personal communication, Aug. 20, 1998).

### Summary

The majority of the reporters, legislators, and political advocates interviewed for this study said the evolution bill's sponsors were not very articulate or well organized. The bill's supporters also said they tried to keep the legislative debate more narrowly focused, and did not actively pursue the development of a coalition in support of the bill. This conclusion is supported by their comments, as reported in the four newspapers studied, and by the limited number of other sources speaking out in support of the bill.

Their approach to the issue allowed the bill's opponents to dominate the public discussion of the evolution legislation. Most of those interviewed agreed the bill's opponents were better organized and much more proactive in broadening the terms of the debate and developing coalitions against it. Their dominance in this debate is reflected by the nearly 3-1 margin of unfavorable to favorable news frames and news sources in the newspapers studied, as well as by the observations of those interviewed.

## Conclusion

The public debate over the 1996 Tennessee evolution bill was largely dominated by the voices and frames of the opposition. It is clear that the bill's opponents won the framing contest in this debate – by a nearly 3-1 margin.

Those who opposed Senate Bill #3229, which would have banned the teaching of evolution as fact in Tennessee's public schools, carefully strategized how best to frame the bill in order to build the kind of coalition needed to defeat it. They successfully broadened the terms of the debate, and brought third parties into the debate. They co-opted some of the language and favorite issues of their opponents. They used popular cultural symbols and social values to create resonances and add salience to their views, while the bill's supporters appeared to be hamstrung in this regard by their desire to downplay the bill's religious motivations.

In short, the findings of this study show that the bill's opponents did a better job than did the bill's supporters of framing the debate in terms of their own worldviews. The findings also demonstrate that the bill's opponents largely followed the patterns of media and political interaction expected of an underdog as they worked to defeat the bill.

### Research Questions

The findings answer several of the research questions posed by this study, such as: How was this debate framed? Which news frames dominated the debate? Did either side in this debate try to use popular cultural symbols and social values to create resonances and help advance its views? Which side in this debate was more successful in framing this issue in terms of its own worldview?



They do much to explain how and why such a populist bill was eventually defeated by the Tennessee legislature.

Who framed this debate?

The more complex research question posed by this study is “who framed this debate?” This question is more difficult to answer because it is harder to determine the facts of the case, and because it gets to the heart of an ongoing theoretical debate in the field of mass communications.

According to traditional agenda-setting theory, which has been a dominant theory in this field since the 1970s, the question of who framed an issue can be answered by looking to the news media. This perspective argues that reporters and editors frame an issue when they decide which aspects of are most important and should be given prominence in their news coverage of it. This media framing influences how an issue is positioned in the public mind, and thus how the public thinks about that issue.

But who influences the media?

However, this theoretical approach only tells part of the story. For example, it does not address who may have influenced the media. In this study, for instance, it was clear that the bill’s leading opponents – Tennessee ACLU Director Hedy Weinberg, TEA Lobbyist Jerry Winters, and Senate Education Committee Chairman Andy Womack – consciously and rather successfully sought to frame this issue to the news media and to legislators in ways that would help defeat the bill.

Weinberg, especially, was candid about her organization’s efforts to frame the issue in ways that would appeal to different potential allies in this debate. As Jon Crisp, former director of the Tennessee Christian Coalition, conceded, “If

anybody won the rhetoric debate, it was the ACLU" (personal communication, Aug. 20, 1998).

Traditional agenda-setting theory also fails to consider who were the targeted audiences in this debate. In this case study, it could be argued that the targeted audience was not the general public but the senators who would vote on the bill and any constituency groups that could be brought into the debate.

Winters stated that the TEA did not "try to whip up the troops" during the legislative debate. Rather, the TEA focused its efforts on "members of the House and Senate Education Committees because that was the first legislative hurdle that that bill had to jump" (personal communication, Aug. 5, 1998).

Weinberg said the ACLU was similarly focused in its efforts to derail the bill. She explained, "We really needed to kill it in the Senate . . . were it to pass the Senate, I think it might have been out of control in the House" (personal communication, Aug. 7, 1998). She noted that the major media attention the bill attracted also influenced some legislators to vote against it.

Womack also spoke of his attempts to frame the evolution bill - as a state mandate, as unconstitutional, as too costly and too confusing - in ways that would provide political cover for those senators who wanted to vote against but were afraid of appearing "un-Christian" in an election year.

It is clear that these individuals understood who their target audiences were in this debate, and how to reach them - directly, and through the news media. Their comments demonstrate the importance of looking beyond the news coverage of an issue to those who helped shape that news coverage.

So, in addition to determining which frames dominated the 1996 evolution debate, this study also attempted to determine who introduced key frames and

how those frames were articulated and used. To accomplish this, the researcher interviewed key legislators and political advocates involved in this debate and some of the reporters who covered it, in addition to conducting a frame analysis of selected news coverage of this debate.

The findings of this thesis provide support for the contention made by several researchers (e.g., Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Hansen, 1991) that all key players in a political debate, not just the media, are actively involved in interpreting and defining the issues. For example, the findings are in line with Lang and Lang's (1983) theory of agenda-building, which views political communication as "a collective model in which media, government, and the citizenry reciprocally influence one another" (p. 58-59), and with Neuman et. al.'s (1992) constructionist model of political communication which assumes that all parties, not just the news media, are involved in determining how issues are framed and how reality is defined.

#### Active audience.

However, these models presume an active audience, which could be seen as a limiting factor in an era when fewer and fewer people seem to be paying attention to the news. To address this issue, this thesis incorporated Petty and Priester's (1994) elaboration likelihood model of persuasion, in combination with several ideas about the use of popular cultural symbols and social values to create resonances and increase salience (e.g., Carey, 1989; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Hansen, 1991).

The elaboration likelihood model proposes two different modes of absorbing information, depending upon the audience's level of interest and

motivation, and suggests how resonant, appealing political messages might be able to influence the attitudes of even the politically uninvolved.

In this case study, it could be argued that the primary target audience of this debate – the legislators who voted on this bill – were for the most part an active audience. According to Petty and Priester's model (1994), then, this means they tended to use the central or direct route to process information on the evolution bill and make thoughtful, informed decisions about it.

However, legislators' views on this bill may also have been influenced by their awareness that many constituents were likely to be inattentive to the details of this bill. According to Petty and Priester's (1994) model, they would be more likely to use the peripheral or indirect route to pick up fragments of information on this issue, which would mean that they could be swayed by appealing resonances or the appearance of a popular consensus on the issue. This perspective might help account for several legislators' change of heart on the bill as negative frames came to dominate the news coverage of the debate on this issue.

The elaboration likelihood model is one way to explain how people with low levels of motivations and interest in an issue can still form general attitudes about it. Addressing a similar concern relating to agenda-setting and priming, Willnat (McCombs, Shaw & Weaver, 1997) suggested distinguishing between memory-based and impression-driven models of priming to explain how people process information and make decisions.

### Symbols and Social Values

Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993) described the news and other media output as arenas in which symbolic contests are carried out. Gamson and Modigliani

(1989) said one could view debates over public policy issues as “a symbolic contest over which interpretation should prevail” (p. 2), and further noted that some symbols used in a debate tend to be more appealing “because their ideas and language resonate with larger cultural themes” (p. 5).

The bill’s sponsors linked their arguments in favor of the bill to several powerful symbols and related social values, including: God and the Bible; equal time and fairness; traditional family values; protecting children; and parental rights. In a religiously and politically conservative state such as Tennessee, this should have given them an advantage in the debate. However, this potential advantage was tempered by a personal disadvantage.

As one reporter noted, “The legislators who sponsored the bill . . . were not terribly articulate guys” (Mayshark, personal communication, July 31, 1998). Another reporter put it even more bluntly.

“Tommy’s got a lot of good qualities, but his ability to handle the King’s English isn’t among them,” another reporter commented. “He was just cut to ribbons by [Sen.] Cohen in the debate. Cohen is an attorney, and he’s got a pretty sharp mind and a sharp tongue” (Cheek, personal communication, Aug. 13, 1998).

#### Articulate and savvy.

Although perhaps operating at a cultural disadvantage in Tennessee, the bill’s opponents benefited from having several articulate and politically savvy speakers for their cause. Senators Womack and Cohen led the charge inside the legislature, while the ACLU’s Weinberg and the TEA’s Winters marshaled the cavalry outside the assembly. Given the “righteous” aspects of this debate, this was critical. As *Commercial Appeal* reporter Wade noted:

It is one of those issues where, when it is debated in the political realm, people who thought the bill was silly . . . were not about to come out and say so. They were going to say, 'I believe in the Bible, and I believe what the Bible says, and I don't think people should be ridiculed for believing in the Bible' . . . . They were certainly not going to come out and side with the ACLU on anything. (Wade, personal communication, July 31, 1998)

Wade's comments also point up the importance of knowing when not to speak. For example, although Weinberg was the first person to speak out publicly against the bill, and was perhaps the leading strategizer and organizer of the coalition against it, she apparently also had the political sense to ease out of the limelight once the debate was fully engaged. This may well have been a critical move since the ACLU carries considerable negative baggage in a politically conservative state such as Tennessee - as indicated by the many conservative campaigns that have accused liberal candidates of being a "card-carrying member of the ACLU."

#### Turning the tables.

The bill's opponents also effectively used the mandate/local control and cost frames to raise questions about the bill among other legislators and groups who might otherwise have remained neutral or tended to support the bill. Since it is usually the conservatives who argue against mandates and for local control, with these frames Sen. Womack co-opted the language of his opponents. By framing the bill as a state mandate and an intrusion into the local control of schools, Womack gave his fellow legislators an acceptable reason to oppose a populist bill.

As Lang and Lang (1981) noted, "The clever campaigner will seek to persuade by focusing on those issues that work in his or her favor while deliberately downplaying those that might work for the opponent" (p. 449).

In this debate, those who opposed the evolution bill were greatly aided by its supporters' efforts to avoid raising constitutional questions relating to the separation of church and state. They were also aided by their inexplicably limited use of the equal time frame. Although this frame has not been persuasive in the legal arena, it has been shown to have significant populist appeal (Taylor & Condit, 1988).

In addition, the bill's opponents had the benefit of more colorful symbols and arguments. Although the cultural symbols of God and the Bible and social values of equal time and fairness may resonate with many citizens, it's hard to compete with the catchiness and entertainment value of the "monkey bill."

Another reason for the dominance of opposition frames is that the bill's opponents simply had more voices. They brought together more people and groups who were willing to speak up on their behalf than did the bill's supporters. As a result, there were more readily available sources and story angles opposing the bill than there were favoring it. So it should come as no surprise, then, that the news coverage of this issue contained nearly three times as many "con" frames as "pro" frames.

#### Political Strategizing and Coalition-Building

In a public policy debate, according to Liebler and Bendix (1996) and Petersen and Markle (1989), the group with the most power generally tries to limit the scope of the controversy while the challenger tries to widen the scope of the debate and involve third parties in it. Although neither side in this debate provided an exact match for this model (for example, those who opposed the bill did try to limit the debate in one key area by avoiding any discussion of whether man was descended from monkey), the overall pattern held true. In the

evolution bill debate, the power position appears to have been held by the bill's sponsors while its opponents acted as challengers to the status quo.

From one perspective, this power positioning not make sense. Since the bill's opponents had the Constitution on their side, it could be argued that they held the legal power position in this debate. Because of that, perhaps the bill's supporters were only deluding themselves by thinking they held the power position in this debate.

However, power can be measured in several ways - legally, culturally, and politically, for example. In Tennessee, conservative Christians are used to wielding cultural and political power, even if they don't always have the final say on some constitutional questions. As one reporter noted, "In Tennessee, and certainly in East Tennessee . . . the conservative religious side is probably more culturally empowered and speaks much more for the popular sentiment" (Mayshark, personal communication, July 31, 1998).

So, even though the bill's supporters may not have held the legal power position in this debate, it appears they thought they held the cultural and political power position - and that perception guided their actions.

A comment by the TCC's Crisp corroborates this perception. Although his organization was not significantly involved in this debate, Crisp said, "If the ACLU had ever pushed us far enough here in Tennessee, we could have raised the specter . . . that these people want to dictate to you what your religious beliefs ought to be. . . . You know, if we want to sell fear, we can do it" (personal communication, Aug. 20, 1998).

The bill's supporters generally tried to limit the scope of the debate, indicating that they held (or thought they held) the political and/or social power



position on this issue within the state. Also, they did not appear to have reached out to potential allies to build a coalition in support of the bill. This observation was corroborated by several of those interviewed. For example, reporters Cheek and Mayshark commented that they saw no signs of a grassroots movement in favor of the bill. Also, Jon Crisp pointedly noted that neither Rep. Whitson nor Sen. Burks had consulted with the Tennessee Christian Coalition about the bill.

The TCC and some other conservative political groups, such as the Eagle Forum, did speak in favor of the bill when asked to comment on it by reporters. But the bill's sponsors appeared to lack significant buy-in from these potential allies. This proved to be problematical in a year when the state's political conservatives already had a full slate of high-profile legislative efforts under way. As Crisp noted, "We had bigger fish to fry" (personal communication, Aug. 20, 1998).

In accordance with the model, the bill's opponents acted like the less-powerful challenger in this debate. They worked to defeat the bill by broadening the scope of the debate and cultivating political allies. For example, they criticized the bill's questionable constitutionality and its lack of due process for teachers, and developed a variety of other reasons to vote against it. These arguments helped them involve third parties in the debate, including university science departments and faculty senates, high school science teachers, scientists, and editorial writers who were concerned about state's image and the bill's potential impact on the state's economy.

Through efforts such as these, the bill's opponents were able to build and mobilize an effective coalition against the bill. Overall, the findings of this study show that the bill's opponents were more articulate, better organized, and more

successful at framing this debate in terms of their own worldviews – and thus more successful at swaying both legislative and public opinion against the bill.

Of course, it could also be argued that the sponsors lost this debate because they never really expected it to pass and so they didn't try very hard. In this scenario, their real objective was getting re-elected, and the bill was just a public relations ploy that got out of hand when it was picked up by the national news media.

However, regardless of the motivations of the bill's sponsors, they were clearly outgunned by the bill's opponents in this debate.

#### Credibility and Replicability of Results

There is no question that the small sample size (4 newspapers and 61 articles) limits the credibility of the results and conclusions of this study. However, the triangulation of multiple sources of data and methods of analysis helps offset that disadvantage. As Yin (1994) noted, the use of multiple sources of evidence allows for multiple measures of the same phenomenon. This offers the potential to develop converging lines of inquiry that can strengthen a study's findings. Similarly, the use of multiple methods of analysis also provides a means for corroboration of results.

On the quantitative side, content and framing analysis were used to provide the baseline results for this study. These results showed the overall trends in this debate, such as the overall tone of headlines and news articles, and which news frames were used most frequently. Qualitative data from interviews and other sources was used to enlarge and explain those baseline results. Since this study addressed several questions related to culture, interpretation, and power, it seemed appropriate to use qualitative methods because of their

emphasis on understanding and explaining the situation or event under study (Lindlof, 1995).

In this study, the results of the framing analysis converged with the results of the qualitative content coding, lending support and credibility to the overall findings.

Intercoder reliability.

The researcher originally planned to use Scott's pi to calculate intercoder reliability for this study, but the complexity and sheer number of frame coding categories made that unfeasible. Due to the large number of variables in this study (27 possible frames and 22 possible source categories), it was not feasible to calculate percent agreement expected, as required for Scott's pi, making it impossible to use that formula. Instead, the admittedly less accurate Holsti formula for intercoder reliability was used.

Using Holsti, the two coders of this study were found to be in 72% agreement *on frames and sources only*. This figure is somewhat low. In part, this is because the unit of analysis for this study was frames, not paragraphs, and because there was a catchall "other" frame category. This allowed for significant coder leeway in deciding what was and wasn't a frame – the source of nearly two-thirds (64%) of intercoder disagreements – as well as on which frame was being used and which type of source was being quoted.

(Note: The level of intercoder agreement would have been much higher if every content coding category on the coding sheet [see Appendix A] had been used in this calculation – including those for which there was little or no possibility of disagreement, such as "newspaper" and "date article appeared" – instead of just frames and sources.)

### Limitations of This Study

The researcher was unable to reach one of the two sponsors of the evolution bill, Sen. Tommy Burks, for an interview. His perspective on the bill would have been helpful.

However, the researcher was able to interview several legislators and political advocates on both sides of this issue, as well as four of the reporters who covered the legislative debate for the newspapers used in this study. They covered the spectrum of opinions on this bill, and provided a good balance of perspectives for this study.

#### A missing frame.

One additional frame probably should have been noted in the discussion of minor frames for this study. As pointed out by the second coder for this study, another underlying theme in this debate was the idea of one group imposing its beliefs on others. This frame was used by both sides in this debate, and would have been categorized as a mixed frame. Thus, it would not have impacted the ratio of "pro" to "con" frames.

In the original round of coding, the impose beliefs frame was found four times, so it was tallied as part of the "other" frame category. The second coder spotted two other articles in which this frame should have been coded, which would have shifted it into the minor (5-10) frame category. This judgment was reinforced by the comments of *Commercial Appeal* reporter Paula Wade, who said,

I really do think that the most powerful thing that was used by both sides, equally . . . was the notion of the state cramming a belief system down somebody's throat . . . whether it was the belief system of science and so-called secular humanism, or the belief system of literalist Christianity. (personal communication, Aug. 14, 1998)

However, because of time and database constraints – and because the addition of this frame would not have significantly changed the overall results of this study – the findings were not amended to include this frame.

#### Questions for Future Research

One of the limitations of this study was the small sample size. Because of this, and the study's focus on the state's large metropolitan dailies, it might be valuable to determine if the overall results would hold true in a larger sample that included more small-town newspapers, including weeklies.

Also, since similar evolution bills were debated in three other states in 1996 and 1997, it would be interesting to compare how those debates were framed. Were the issues the same? Were the debates framed similarly, or did the influence of the 1925 Scopes trial have a significant effect on the course of the debate in Tennessee?

#### Significance of this study

This study contributes to the field of mass communications research in several ways. Overall, it attempts to bridge the traditional divide between quantitative and qualitative research approaches by using both methods.

Just as “two heads are better than one” in addressing most life issues, so it seems reasonable that researchers should not be limited to a single research approach when two good options are available. By drawing on the strengths of each research approach, and by triangulating both data sources and methods of analysis, the “hard” findings that form the foundation of this case study were much enriched with “soft” qualitative detail.

#### Implications for theory.

This case study builds on recent mass communication and sociological

studies (e.g., Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Taylor & Condit, 1988; Robinson & Powell, 1996) that have used frame analysis to show how institutions, political advocates, and social movements use popular cultural symbols and social values to help market their worldviews to the news media and to the public. It illustrates, to use the terminology of Hansen (1991) and Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993), how an issue was articulated and how meaning was constructed by those involved in a specific political debate. And it suggests how the elaboration likelihood model of persuasion (Petty & Priester, 1994) might be used in concert with existing communication models, such as agenda-building and framing, to better describe how advocacy groups and the media can influence public perceptions of public issues.

In addition, this study showed that the two sides in the Tennessee legislative debate followed some of the same patterns observed by Liebler and Bendix (1996) and Petersen and Markle (1989) in their studies of social movements that were involved in public policy debates.

This study also demonstrates the value of taking a more macro-level approach to the question of media influence by looking beyond news content to determine where frames originated, as advocated by Lang and Lang (1981, 1983) and Robinson and Powell (1996). This may have been less of an issue in the 1960s and '70s, when the concept of agenda-setting was developed. But as political institutions, politicians, and political advocacy groups have grown increasingly media-savvy and adept at putting their own "spin" on issues, this has become an important consideration in media studies.

For example, in their study of the 1992 presidential race, Walters, Walters and Gray (1996) suggested that the rise of marketed media, with its emphasis on

matching content to audience needs, may be responsible for the increase in audience influence on both issue ordering and the outcomes of political campaigns.

This study's findings show that the frames used in the news coverage of 1996 evolution bill were developed by the legislators and political lobbyists who were involved in that debate. This is not to say that the media were without influence in this debate, but that the news media were not the only, and probably not the primary, influence on the way this issue was framed.

A number of media scholars (e.g., Dalton, Beck, Huckfeldt, & Koetzle, 1998; Lang & Lang, 1981; Walters et. al., 1996) have criticized agenda-setting theory for its assumption that the mass media set the agenda for political campaigns. Likewise, this thesis questions that premise and supports Liebler and Bendix's (1996) contention that "frames found in the news media may have their roots elsewhere" (p.54) - including, as was the case in this debate, in the information campaigns conducted by the opposing parties in a debate. It also supports Robinson and Powell's (1996) observation that the news media are most strongly influenced by the political players in a public debate.

As Walters et. al. (1996) commented,

Despite promising beginnings, the nearly quarter century of research that has followed the 1972 [agenda-setting] study has produced mixed results. . . . While agenda setting posits that the media agenda influences the public agenda, it is equally plausible that the public agenda influences the media agenda.

Walters et. al. continued,

In what McCombs has called the 'fourth phase' of agenda-setting studies, researchers have been attempting to answer the question 'who sets the media's agenda' (1992). This should have been

among the first questions examined by researchers looking at issue selection by significant publics. (1996, p. 10-11)

It should be noted that, in response to criticisms of agenda-setting theory, its practitioners have attempted to amend it. McCombs now speaks of the expanded theory of agenda setting, which focuses on the mass media's influence on how people think about individuals and topics in the news (McCombs, Llamas, Lopez-Escobar & Rey, 1997). A new book on agenda-setting theory, edited by McCombs, Shaw and Weaver (1997), attempted to incorporate the concepts of framing, priming, and related psychological theories into one common theory of political communication.

However, in his review of that book, Brosius (1998) commented, "It is interesting to observe how agenda-setting researchers are claiming framing and priming concepts as part of their territory, while others (e.g., Price & Tewksbury, 1995, p. 2) argue that agenda-setting (and other phenomena of media effects) are 'best conceived as variants of priming and framing'" (p. 184).

#### The possible demise of a paradigm.

Perhaps these repeated attempts to rework and shore up agenda-setting theory should be regarded in light of Kuhn's (1970) discussion of paradigm shifts in science. Kuhn said a paradigm shift can occur when normal, cumulative research is overtaken by the emergence of significant scientific anomalies that challenge the existing paradigm, or by new discoveries that cause researchers to re-evaluate that paradigm. In the case of agenda-setting theory, it appears that significant anomalies do exist and that researchers are in the process of re-evaluating this theory.

Kuhn also noted that those researchers who are most heavily invested in the current paradigm are often unwilling or unable to experience the conversion



of viewpoint the comes with a paradigm shift. Instead, they resist change and try to forestall the overthrow of their favored theory. But if inconsistencies continue to accumulate, and if other researchers continue to develop better explanations, a paradigm shift will eventually occur.

### Summary

This thesis triangulated qualitative and quantitative research methods and data sources to analyze how the public debate on a controversial political issue was framed. In particular, this study focused on who framed the debate as a key to understanding the process and outcome of that debate.

The findings showed that the news coverage of the legislation debate was dominated by the frames and voices of the those who opposed the bill. The findings also confirmed that social movements and political advocates interact with political institutions and the media in predictable ways, based on their power position in society.

Finally, the findings of this thesis support the constructionist view that debates on public issues are framed by all involved parties, not just the news media. The findings call into question some of the basic concepts of traditional agenda-setting theory.

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## Appendix A

### CODING SHEET

*(Circle appropriate number for each category/question)*

Article # \_\_\_\_\_

1. Newspaper
  - 1) Commercial Appeal (Memphis)
  - 2) Herald Citizen (Cookeville)
  - 3) News Sentinel (Knoxville)
  - 4) Tennessean (Nashville)
2. Date article appeared (*Mo/Day/Yr*): \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/96
3. Type of article
  - 1) general news article
  - 2) feature article
  - 3) sidebar (short article paired with a longer article)
  - 4) newspaper editorial
  - 5) other opinion piece (personal column or commentary)
4. Prominence/Length of article (e.g., word count, actual or estimate\*): \_\_\_\_\_ words
5. Prominence/Placement of the article
  - 1) front page
  - 2) front page of the second section (1B) or of a Sunday section
  - 3) editorial page
  - 4) inside (all other)
6. Tone of the headline?
  - 1) very favorable (strongly supports the legislation)
  - 2) favorable
  - 3) neither favorable nor unfavorable
  - 4) unfavorable
  - 5) very unfavorable (strongly opposes the legislation)
7. If a photograph or illustration accompanies the article, what tone does it convey?
  - 1) very favorable (strongly supports the legislation)
  - 2) favorable
  - 3) neither favorable nor unfavorable
  - 4) unfavorable
  - 5) very unfavorable (strongly opposes the legislation)
  - 6) N/A – there is no photograph or illustration

8. What is the overall tone of the article?
  - 1) very favorable (strongly supports the legislation)
  - 2) favorable
  - 3) neither favorable nor unfavorable
  - 4) unfavorable
  - 5) very unfavorable (strongly opposes the legislation)
  
9. What is the **primary or main focus** of the article?
  - 1) Bible Bills – reviews the legislature’s “morals” bills, including the evolution bill
  - 2) Overview – explains the bill, its progress, amendments, the legislative process
  - 3) Politics – focuses on the politics and political maneuvering behind the bill, including the religious right’s degree of political clout/influence in TN politics
  - 4) Morals – moral issues/concerns relating to teaching evolution (families, children)
  - 5) Politics & Morals – combines both of the above
  - 6) Constitutionality – whether or not the evolution legislation is constitutional
  - 7) Image – the evolution bill’s potential impact on the state’s image and economy
  - 8) Education – potential impact on teachers, students, higher ed., academic freedom, etc.
  - 9) Evolution – discusses the theory of evolution, and the meaning of “theory”
  - 10) Evolution vs. Creationism – focuses on differing the beliefs/viewpoints of each
  - 11) Scopes/History – Scopes trial, original “monkey bill,” Darwin, history of debate
  - 12) Cost – focuses on the cost of implementing the legislation (new textbooks, etc.)
  - 13) Reasons/Pro – news sources explain reasons for introducing/supporting the bill
  - 14) Reasons/Con – news sources explain their reasons for opposing the legislation
  - 15) Other – please specify:
  
10. What is the **secondary focus** of the article?
  - 1) Bible Bills – reviews the legislature’s “morals” bills, including the evolution bill
  - 2) Overview – explains the bill, its progress, amendments, the legislative process
  - 3) Politics – focuses on the politics and political maneuvering behind the evolution bill, incl. the religious right’s degree of political clout/influence in TN politics
  - 4) Morals – moral issues/concerns relating to teaching evolution (families, children)
  - 5) Politics & Morals – combines both of the above
  - 6) Constitutionality – whether or not the evolution legislation is constitutional
  - 7) Image – the evolution bill’s potential impact on the state’s image and economy
  - 8) Education – potential impact on teachers, students, higher ed., academic freedom
  - 9) Evolution – discusses the theory of evolution, and the meaning of “theory”
  - 10) Evolution vs. Creationism – focuses on differing the beliefs/viewpoints of each
  - 11) Scopes/History – Scopes trial, original “monkey bill,” Darwin, history of debate
  - 12) Cost – focuses on the cost of implementing the legislation (new textbooks, etc.)
  - 13) Reasons/Pro – news sources explain reasons for introducing/supporting the bill
  - 14) Reasons/Con – news sources explain their reasons for opposing the legislation
  - 15) Other – please specify:
  - 16) Not Applicable – no secondary focus, or several other points made

## CODING FRAMES & SOURCES

Using the frame definitions outlined on the attached sheets, identify and code all significant frames in the order of their appearance in the news article. Also code each frame for its source(s), in the order of their appearance in the article.

- |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| <p><b>1. Frame #1:</b> _____</p> <p>1) Source #1: _____</p> <p>2) Source #2: _____</p> <p>3) Source #3: _____</p>   | <p><b>2. Frame #2:</b> _____</p> <p>1) Source #1: _____</p> <p>2) Source #2: _____</p> <p>3) Source #3: _____</p>   | <p><b>3. Frame #3:</b> _____</p> <p>1) Source #1: _____</p> <p>2) Source #2: _____</p> <p>3) Source #3: _____</p>   |
| <p><b>4. Frame #4:</b> _____</p> <p>1) Source #1: _____</p> <p>2) Source #2: _____</p> <p>3) Source #3: _____</p>   | <p><b>5. Frame #5:</b> _____</p> <p>1) Source #1: _____</p> <p>2) Source #2: _____</p> <p>3) Source #3: _____</p>   | <p><b>6. Frame #6:</b> _____</p> <p>1) Source #1: _____</p> <p>2) Source #2: _____</p> <p>3) Source #3: _____</p>   |
| <p><b>7. Frame #7:</b> _____</p> <p>1) Source #1: _____</p> <p>2) Source #2: _____</p> <p>3) Source #3: _____</p>   | <p><b>8. Frame #8:</b> _____</p> <p>1) Source #1: _____</p> <p>2) Source #2: _____</p> <p>3) Source #3: _____</p>   | <p><b>9. Frame #9:</b> _____</p> <p>1) Source #1: _____</p> <p>2) Source #2: _____</p> <p>3) Source #3: _____</p>   |
| <p><b>10. Frame #10:</b> _____</p> <p>1) Source #1: _____</p> <p>2) Source #2: _____</p> <p>3) Source #3: _____</p> | <p><b>11. Frame #11:</b> _____</p> <p>1) Source #1: _____</p> <p>2) Source #2: _____</p> <p>3) Source #3: _____</p> | <p><b>12. Frame #12:</b> _____</p> <p>1) Source #1: _____</p> <p>2) Source #2: _____</p> <p>3) Source #3: _____</p> |
| <p><b>13. Frame #13:</b> _____</p> <p>1) Source #1: _____</p> <p>2) Source #2: _____</p> <p>3) Source #3: _____</p> | <p><b>14. Frame #14:</b> _____</p> <p>1) Source #1: _____</p> <p>2) Source #2: _____</p> <p>3) Source #3: _____</p> | <p><b>15. Frame #15:</b> _____</p> <p>1) Source #1: _____</p> <p>2) Source #2: _____</p> <p>3) Source #3: _____</p> |

## Appendix B

### The Reporters who Covered the 1996 Tennessee Debate on Evolution

NOTE: Reporters who covered this issue for the four newspapers included in this study are listed by newspaper, in order of the number of articles written. (\*Asterisks indicate those reporters who were interviewed for this study.)

#### *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, Tennessee

*Paula Wade, Nashville Bureau	5 news articles
(AP - non-bylined)	3 news articles
Richard Locker, Nashville Bureau Chief	2 news articles
Sarah A. Derks (education)	1 news article
Jody Callahan, general assignment reporter	1 news article

#### *The Herald Citizen*, Cookeville, Tennessee

AP - Vicki Brown byline	5 articles
AP - non-bylined	5 articles
Advertorials (church commentary ads)	2 advertorials
Mary Jo Denton, Staff Writer	1 news article

#### *Knoxville News Sentinel*, Knoxville, Tennessee

Tom Humphrey, Nashville Bureau	3 articles
*Jesse Fox Mayshark, Staff Writer (UT beat)	2 articles
AP - Vicki Brown	2 news articles
Editorial Page Writer	2 editorials
Rebecca Ferrar, Nashville Bureau	1 news article
Frank Cagle, Staff Writer/Columnist (state gov't.)	1 column (half)
David Hunter, Local Columnist	1 column
Theotis Robinson, Local Columnist	1 column

#### *The Tennessean*, Nashville, Tennessee

*Duren Cheek, Staff Writer (state government)	12 news articles
*Ray Waddle, Religion Editor	3 articles/1 column
Larry Daughrey, Staff Writer (state government)	3 news articles
Editorial Page Writer	3 editorials
Lisa Benavides, Staff Writer (education)	1 news article
Diane Long, Feature Writer	1 feature article
Catherine Darnell, Staff Writer/Columnist	1 column (first person)
Guest Columnist	1 guest column

## Appendix C

Interview Questions For Key Legislators And Other Key Players/ Advocates

1. What role did you play in the legislative debate? How did you get involved in this issue? Who were the other key players in this debate?
2. Which side in this debate do you think did a better job of explaining their perspective to the public? Why? Were they better organized? More articulate? Some other reason?
3. Do you think the news coverage of this issue was even-handed and fair...or biased? Why? How influential do you think newspaper coverage was in the outcome of this debate? What about radio/tv?
4. Did either side in this debate try to build support for their side by involving other related groups or political advocates?
5. Did either side in this debate try to build support by bringing up related issues and broadening the terms of the debate?
6. Did either side attempt to limit the debate by keeping it more narrowly focused on the legislation?
7. Did either side in this debate try to muddy the issue by using the other side's terminology or buzzwords? (i.e., an example might be a scientist talking about "values" or a religious leader talking about "progress")
8. Do you think either side in this debate was more effective at using popular symbols or social values (such as "family values") to help promote their views?
9. What factors do you think ultimately killed this bill?
10. Why do you think issues such as this keep returning to the legislature?

## Appendix D

### Interview Questions For Reporters

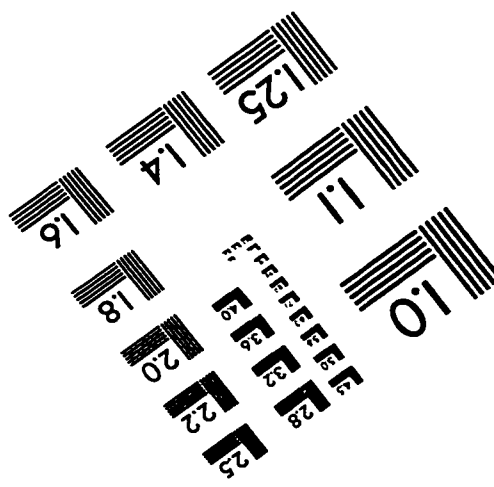
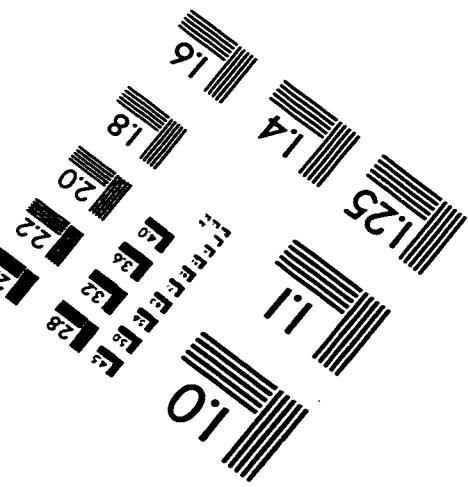
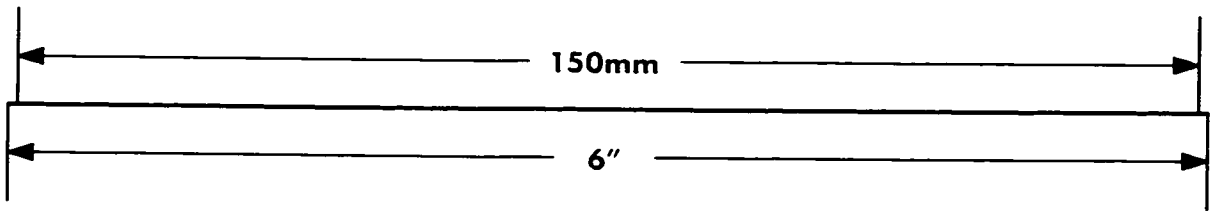
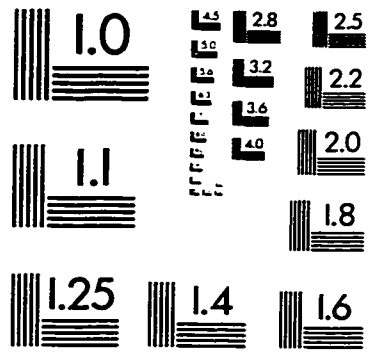
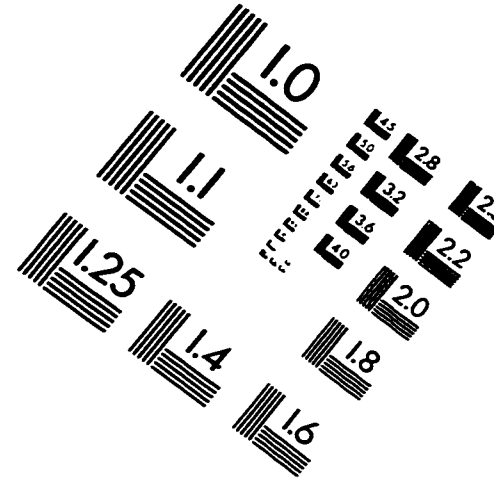
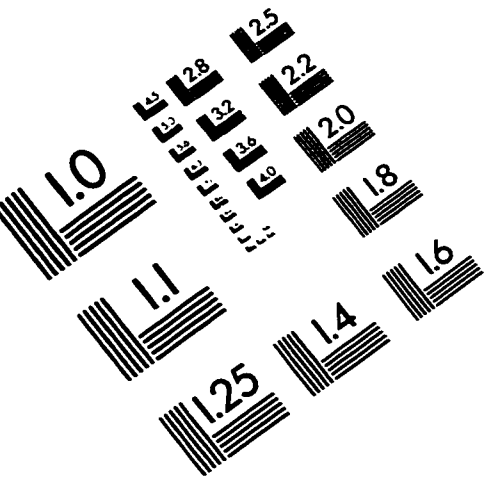
1. Demographic information: news beat or reporting specialty.
2. From your perspective, who were the key players in this debate?
3. Which side in this debate do you think did a better job of explaining their perspective to reporters and the public? Why? Were they better organized? More articulate? Some other reason?
4. Do you think either side in this debate was more effective at using popular symbols or social values to promote their views? (i.e., examples might include "family values," "equal time," "fairness," "progress," or "freedom of choice")
5. Did either side in this debate try to build support by getting related groups or political advocates involved in this debate?
6. Did either side in this debate try to build support by bringing up related issues and broadening the terms of the debate?
7. Did either side attempt to limit the debate by keeping it more narrowly focused?
8. Did either side in this debate attempt to muddy the issue by using the other side's terminology or buzzwords? (i.e., a scientist talking about "values" or a religious leader talking about "progress")
9. What factors do you think ultimately killed this bill?
10. Why do you think this issue keeps returning to the legislative arena?

## Appendix E

Identification of "Other" Frames

<u>Description of Frame</u>	<u>Mentions</u>	<u>Article/Frame No.</u>
Impose beliefs or views on others	5	3/F5; 6/F12; 24B/F6; 45/F9; 61/F2
The bill is legal/constitutional	3	1/F3; 3/F3; 52/F7
Just trying to get creationism and religion into the schools	1	30/F9
Culture wars	1	14/F1
Evolution's threat for Christians	1	14/F3
Progressive	1	14/F4
Sensitivity is needed on this issue	1	17/F5
Plurality and civility are needed	1	21/F4
Burks' circular reasoning re: need for new textbooks	1	35/F27
Belief in creationism has nothing to do with supporting this bill	1	41/F4
This is not an important issue for the legislature to be considering	1	43/F1
Teachers are volunteering to be the next Scopes	1	52/F3
This bill is not making the state into a laughingstock	1	55/F2
Criticizes/slams creationists	1	58/F2
Do you believe you're descended from a lower species?	1	60/F5
Had no complaints on evolution from parents in my district	1	60, F7
Should keep religion out of schools	1	61/F3
I don't believe in evolution	1	61/F4

# IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)



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