

FRAMING PUBLIC ISSUES AND WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

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Mass media *frames* influence audience perception, discussion and attitudes of acceptance or rejection of an idea; framing often determines the likelihood of an audience to act on the issue presented. What an audience brings to a media experience or message—audience schemas—contributes to their news interpretation, but *framing* may provide media with their most powerful effects, and some researchers suggest this is especially true for newly emerging issues (see Hornig, for example).

Traditional arguments about media impact have media either weighing in with very powerful effects, limited effects or those hefty enough only to maintain the status quo. Oftentimes, maintenance of status quo delivers a resounding punch as mass communication scholars Sandman, Sachsman and Rubin warned us some time ago. This paper summarizes the main points of a presentation about the importance of modern media framing and how those who deal with rural and farm issues might improve media attention to those issues. It also attempts to condense the results of what was actually a workshop or working dialogue between those in the audience at the 1993 National Public Policy Education Conference in Clearwater Beach, Florida, and a panel of journalists. For more than two hours during an afternoon session, media experts and national sources of information about rural and farm news discussed news values, the media's farm news agenda, media process and gatekeeper styles.

News Values

Earlier in the conference, a futurist demonstrated one of media's most important roles when he used a series of newspaper headlines to talk about the past, report current conditions and predict the future. Although there is no small amount of discomfort when those who understand media process see an "expert" reporting history via *USA Today* headlines, it is true that one of media's primary contributions is to record history. Other media roles are to inform, to survey the environment (either as "watch dog" or "lap dog"), to entertain, to educate and to make a profit. None are surprised that the last is the most important. Given these standard roles, the following list of what makes an issue or event newsworthy seems reasonable. News

should be: new information, unusual, interesting, timely, surprising. It should also be about change, impact, conflict or human interest. However, the most significant factor in newsworthiness is proximity. Where your news occurred in relation to the newspaper or news station or their market area and the localness or obvious immediate audience-involvement elements of a story are critical in getting coverage. Localization alone is not the primary concern, but proximity of the story to the reporter's beat also plays a role in whether your news is covered.

Coverage of some farm or rural issues may decline if information is framed as science or environmental news. Recent studies conducted by Scientists Institute for Public Information (SIPI) and a 1993 Harris poll found a drop in newspaper science sections from ninety-six in 1990 to forty-seven in 1992. However, those same studies found that reader interest in science has not similarly declined. A 1993 SIPI survey found four in ten American adults actively consuming science news, while 56 percent of the sampled public reported watching programs about science, nature and technology. Some 34 percent say they are involved with science news on a daily basis. Indeed, 75 percent of the respondents said science news is as important as education news and more than 60 percent felt science news is as important as crime, financial, political or entertainment news. The SIPI/Harris survey also found important gender differences in how the public responds to science stories. Women are more interested in news articles dealing with children's health or health care in general, while men's interest peaks more with energy or technological breakthrough stories.

Clearly, there is audience interest in landfill and incineration news stories, the impact of global climate change on farming and food supplies, and the emergence of new foods through genetic engineering. Rural America's issues easily meet news value criteria. However, we face the task of pointing out to some news editors the importance and profitability of reporting our news if the issues are seen as science stories. There is more comfort in the findings that government continues to be media's preferred information source.

The News Agenda

In spite of the public's continuing lack of confidence in local, state and federal government—they typically report greater trust and assess higher knowledgeability for doctors or nonprofit environmental or consumer groups—the media look to government officials and government press releases or reports for both story ideas and background data. That may explain why, in repeated content analyses of media reporting on science and environmental issues, we find half are “yardstick” stories, telling us how much, how little, how often

and so on, and half are neither alarming nor reassuring, but provide neutral, explanatory information on a subject.

Regardless of what issue has made it to the media agenda, we can be assured of the following truisms about media's coverage: 1) Information will be accurate; 2) Any errors will mainly be sins of omission; 3) Stories will be journalistically balanced; 4) "Factoids" of science or technological information will be presented without much context; 5) The focus will be on issues immediately relevant to the public; 6) The news will *not* be sensationalized; 7) The information will be accessible to most readers (or viewers/listeners); and 8) If there are weaknesses in the reporting, there is plenty of blame to be shared equally between the journalists and the sources of their information, generally, a government source (see Lewenstein for the source of this modified list and other research on science and the media).

While this may suggest a meaningful news agenda, a healthy dose of reality in terms of the media's perception of public interests can be found in Table 1, a compilation of issues covered by television talk shows in a randomly selected week. We should be reminded that the audience for these twenty-some shows is substantial in most markets. On the other hand, not to give the television medium the appearance of terminal flakiness, Table 2 lists TV's prime time lineup, and we can see that five of the ten most watched shows are

Table 1. TV Talk Show Issues.

<u>ISSUE "TALK"</u>
Celebrities & Elected Officials [Regis & Kathie Lee/Whoopi] (from Billy Ray Cyrus to Al Gore)
BBQ Equipment & Organizing a Home Office [Today; Good Morning America]
Sports [Arsenio/Leno/Letterman/Larry King] (from fly fishing to football)
Gang Violence & Crime Stories [Sonya/Sally Jessy Raphael]
Dysfunctional Families [Jenny Jones/Jerry Springer] (from infidelity to incest)
Control Freaks & Stalkings [Maury Povich]
Wealthy Bachelors [Donahue]
Celebrity Look-a-Likes [Geraldo] & Celebrity Mothers [Vicki]
Mercy Killing & Spanking Children [This Morning/Oprah]
... from 21 daily shows in most markets

Table 2. Prime Time TV.

<u>TV'S PRIME TIME TOP</u>
60 Minutes*
Roseanne
Home Improvement
20/20*
Prime Time Live*
Murder, She Wrote
Dateline NBC*
Movie (ABC & CBS Sunday Night)
48 Hours*
Murphy Brown
*news mags.

news magazine format programming. There is a place for rural and farm issues on television's agenda.

Media Process and Formats

Knowing how to present information in the most useful form is probably as important as providing newsworthy items and credible sourcing for stories. A news release is often no more than a wasted tree. It is no secret that most (some report as high as 80 percent) of all press releases received in a day will end up unread, unopened and certainly unused before they hit the recycle bin. Public relations educators, at least the good ones, are teaching their students to know when to send a news brief or advisory, and when to prepare full wire copy or a news report (see Valenti for when not to do a video news release [VNR]). Other formats often more appropriate to consider in providing mediated messages are: fact sheets, features, op-ed commentary, letters to the editor, backgrounders or position papers. Sometimes an arranged meeting with an editorial staff member or columnist results in more effective future handling of your issues than anything sent through the mail or faxed no matter how skillfully prepared.

The key to successful media relations is knowing both the medium and its individual style and knowing the specific individual—the right journalist—for your story. The “reader friendly” newspapers of the '90s are concerned with *anchoring*, providing a consistent ease of knowing what is where and offering newsbriefs; in-depth “extra” sections to provide more information to readers on a selected subject; enhanced visual appeal, more color and tone; more effective organization, usually beginning with mastheads; theme days, with Tuesday or Thursday generally set as the science/health/medicine day; leisure, magazine-style reading sections; and much more story telling rather than the old and tired inverted pyramid. Of course, the above is all true of the better newspapers. You may not always deal with the leaders in the industry, so do not forfeit all of your standard inverted pyramid releases just yet. The message is to know what is best, what is preferred and what is most effective for getting your news into your targeted medium.

Gatekeepers Are People Too

While it is still true the average journalist is an under 40, Anglo, white male with a college degree, the characteristics of U.S. news professionals are beginning to change. The percentage of women and minorities working in the media is increasing—slowly—and the different perspectives they bring to news may shift more, if not a different, attention to rural and farm issues. Recall the earlier reported gender differences in science and environmental issues.

But, for the purposes of this session, the panel reflected some of the best current representatives from environmental journalism and science writing. Panelists Booth Gunter, environmental beat specialist for *The Tampa Tribune*, and Michael Nyenhuis, science writer for *The Florida Times-Union*, have between them many years of award-winning reporting. Samples of their work, particularly recent articles on natural pesticide developments and the Benlate controversy, and land and farming issues in Florida's Everglades, demonstrate the journalistic principles we would like to see more often. But it is important to note that even these two same-state-based, similarly good reporters are individuals and bring style and format preferences to their relationships with sources of information.

These proceedings allow only a brief synopsis of the question and answer period that dominated this session. Some of the highlights follow.

Q&A with Media Panelists

Q: How do I find the right media person to tell me how to frame an urgent rural housing need? We have homelessness in rural areas too.

A: Homelessness is already on the agenda. It is a great issue—human element—for getting media's attention. Key points are proximity and what reporter has been covering this issue. Some have a "conspiracy theory" about newsrooms and think we all know what the other is doing or that we are a bunch of puppets only doing assigned stories. Truth is we come up with most of our own story ideas (both panelists agreed that 70 percent of their story ideas came from personal initiative or interest).

Your job is to know who at the paper would be interested in this story. One resource and a way to start is professional association membership directories; the Society of Environmental Journalists (SEJ) has a reputable membership. Call reporters with your idea and as a way to get to know them.

Frankly, the rural homeless sounds like an easy television piece, lots of visual opportunities. Start with a fact sheet and keep going on to the next person until you find the reporter who sees this as a good story. Keep coming back. Rebuild your fact sheet with new information at every opportunity.

Q: What counts in journalism? What are you after other than awards?

A: Placement. We want our work on the front page. Recognition from our peers comes from work well done. The ultimate is a

Pulitzer, but we also want to make a difference. We feel our power as journalists is to right wrongs. We want to feel we are contributing to solutions to society's problems. Fairness and accuracy is what the reporter takes home. Ultimately, our stories have to be about people.

Q: What is the process for determining whether a story is given in-depth coverage or treated as just a caption?

A: Lots of different staff may be involved in one news item. The reporter writes the story and someone else (copywriter) writes the cutlines for photos and the headlines. When you see a bad headline, you can bet the reporter is just as upset as you are. The problem is that many headline writers are young and inexperienced. Headline writing is an art, a real skill. What you are talking about is an industry process problem. It is like the old inverted pyramid. That form does not allow us to get the readers' attention and build some interest in reading the story in the first place. Telling a story is a softer approach and allows us to grab the audience, but remember, the reporter is the story teller and the more skilled writer. It is another good reason to forget releases and just send straight information or tell us the basics. We will write the story. If we need more background or information, then provide the standard news release stuff.

The Washington Post's media critic says each edition of a paper should have at least one item for the reader to chew on, something like an in-depth feature. That is where extension stories could easily fit. That is a whole lot different from *USA Today's* shrink-every-story style. So it depends on which medium you are after.

Remember that there are major differences between print media and radio or television. TV is not in trouble for gaining audiences. Newspapers are holding steady, but not gaining new readers, so the effort is focused on attracting new, younger readers. Radio provides you with a youthful audience, television reaches the masses, and newspapers today are still getting you to policymakers and opinion leaders. One day we hope a younger audience will access newspapers through their PCs.

Q: Communications people at universities seem to believe we are in trouble if we give the edge to one reporter over another. What is the best way to "sell" a story idea?

A: The University of Florida (UF) is a good example of what not to do. They send out dozens of eight inch stories directly over the AP wire on a regular basis. That is no good if they want a shot at a longer in-depth piece. We are not going to report on a

story that another desk has already run as a news brief and, frankly, one panelist stopped even opening the packages of releases that arrive from UF. They are old by the time he gets them and he is not going to waste time reading them. On the other hand, the special publications, like magazines, sent from universities or industry provide story ideas and are generally more useful. If you really have a good story, call or fax a news advisory to a reporter in advance of some massive release. Most news operations receive PR Wire or similar services. (Both reporters noted the uselessness of most press conferences, especially if travel of any distance is required). Again, the key is to establish and build a relationship with the reporters you want to cover your issue(s).

Q: What do you prefer from us as sources, neutral information or should we be taking advocacy positions on policy education?

A: First, keep in mind that television has less than thirty seconds to tell the whole story and print has limited room to quote you. It is difficult to deal with neutral information from an educator, a non-advocate. We need your neutrality in backgrounding. Not pitching the story, but educating us about what the story is. You are more useful in providing us with the “why” of the story. Then, we look for balancing in presenting points of view.

Q: How can we do better soundbites?

A: Reframe the question and give the answer you feel is most important to the audience’s understanding of the issue.

Q: What should we do when reporters make a real mistake, a serious error in print?

A: Reporters will generally stand by their notes, and their editors are expected to back them up. If there has been a genuine misunderstanding or failure to hear accurately what was said, then your best move is to call that reporter and politely try to correct the misinformation—remember, you are building a relationship. And you can always write a letter to the editor offering praise for a story well done when it is appropriate, and suggesting corrections in a report that missed something or misreported something. Letters in print are much stronger than retractions and, if well written, you have not severed a needed relationship by forcing the issue and causing a row. You need the reporter to be informed; let us assume your issue is not going away tomorrow.

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