

## FRAMING, HOT RESEARCH TOPIC, ESSENTIAL SKILL FOR PR PROS

Framing is the use of specific phrases or names, metaphors, images to help the public understand an issue -- or to present a subject in a way that promotes one view of it. Also called "positioning" or "semantic strategy."

While media is one source of framing -- either by repeating phrases presented by news sources or inventing them editorially -- other sources include politicians, organizations, the grapevine, etc. This is perhaps the most active area of pr & communication effects scholarship currently.

Study "Media Framing of the Canadian Tainted Blood Controversy, 1983-1993" by Debbie Steele (Kamloops Society for Comty Living, B.C.) & Kirk Hallahan (Colo State U), analyzed 83 articles from *The Globe & Mail*, found

### A. STORIES FELL INTO 3 DISTINCT TIME PERIODS:

1. **Discovery period** ('83-'85), 15 articles dealt primarily with the discovery of HIV transmission via blood products;
2. **Implication period** ('87-'89), coverage (19 articles) renewed as a growing number of hemophiliacs found they were infected with HIV. Canadian Hemophilia Society embarked upon a campaign to seek gov't compensation;
3. **Grievance period** ('92-'93), attention waned then resurged during debate over whether the federal compensation program that went into effect in early 90s should be allowed to expire at the end of '93 (49 articles).

### B. COVERAGE FALLS INTO 2 DISTINCT FRAMES:

1. **Accident frame**, taking place during the Discovery Period, explained the introduction of infectious blood as unintentional & unavoidable. "Polluted blood," "contaminated" blood supply; "tainted blood" evolved primarily as a journalistic label;
2. **Blame frame**, beginning in the Implication Period, shifting into high gear during the Grievance Period, where the events are explained as the result of the culpable actions of key parties, i.e. "negligent," "indifferent," & "potentially guilty of crime."



**IMPLICATIONS FOR  
CRISIS & ISSUES MGMT**

1. **Frame contests** -- where an organization tangles with those who disagree with its portrayal of a situation. Puts practitioners in the role of frame strategists -- actively promoting particular language, or developing responses to counter words that frame an org'n unfavorably.

"If public relations is defined as the creation & maintenance of mutually beneficial relationships, it could be argued that an effective pr strategy begins with the establishment of common frames about topics or issues upon which there might be disagreement."

2 **Frame change** -- framing is not static; it's a dynamic process. The 3 periods mentioned above coincide with the stages frequently identified in the life cycle of issues (birth of the issue; growth; maturity).

Crisis/issues managers must be attuned to this & engage in frame transformation as required. Evidence in this study suggests the Red Cross might have been too slow in changing its framing of the problem. It failed to fortify its explanation & then only meekly attributed blame to others when the issue reached a full public debate.

3 **Attributing blame is inevitable** -- notions of villains & victims are embedded in our culture. Thus, in crisis & issues we must anticipate the emergence of accusations by *claims-makers* -- as well as the prospect of accusatory framing by *media* covering a crisis or issue.

Red Cross fell victim to "**inadvertence error**" -- where subjects are portrayed as being involved in a blameworthy action when no intent could be demonstrated. Vulnerability lies in the fact that the Red Cross was the only visible actor during the early phases of coverage. Thus it became the most convenient target, the only party whose actions could be questioned. Inadvertence error may be an inescapable problem that crisis & issues managers must address.

In the aftermath of the dispute, Red Cross was forced to withdraw from its role as the exclusive provider of blood in Canada. This may have been beyond its control, the study suggests. "Such a conclusion would lend credence to the argument that crises & issues cannot be managed in their entirety & it's foolish for public relations practitioners to attempt to do so (Pearson, 1990). Chaos theory suggests that some extraordinary events are uncontrollable & that the best pr strategy is simply to ride out the storm & make the best of an admittedly bad situation. Natural forces will return organizations to normal levels (Murphy, 1996)."

— FIVE FRAMING DEVICES SHOW THE PROCESS AT WORK

- 1 **Metaphors:** figures of speech that invite comparisons
- 2 **Catch phrases:** attempt to capture meaning in a single word or phrase
- 3 **Exemplars:** allusions that provide historic examples of situations or actions being discussed
- 4 **Depictions:** characterize the subject using a colorful string of modifiers, or can involve metaphors, similes & examples
- 5 **Visual images:** pictures or graphics that capture the essence visually

## MORE AWARENESS OF NEED FOR NON-FINANCIAL INDICATORS

Article by Thomas Stewart (*Fortune* 7/6) is titled "Real Assets, Unreal Reporting: Why Generally Accepted Accounting Principles generally do an unacceptable job of accounting for the principal activities of knowledge-intensive companies." Stewart uses the phrase "intellectual capital" as an overall term for "intangible assets."

- Hans Johnsson, who managed the Swedish project "Return on Communications" (pr 3/10/97), prefers the term "mind-based assets" to include both intellectual & emotional capital. "Both categories are part of the 'intangible assets' that are so important to most org's today."

In Creamer Dickson Basford's Hidden Value Index (pr 6/26/95), companies are ranked according to analysts' ratings of 8 non-financial factors:

1. Concern for & relations with its employees
2. Ability to reduce costs
3. Ability to avoid regulatory problems
4. Ability to increase revenue
5. Customer satisfaction & loyalty
6. The brand equity of the company & its products
7. Ability to increase productivity
8. Research & development, intellectual capital & ability to innovate

This growing movement to stop evaluating org's strictly on past financial performance is putting pr & what it provides in an entirely new light. (More from Hans Johnsson, Sound Communications, 51 Forest av, Old Greenwich, Ct. 06870; 203/698-2270. Or from CDB, 212/367-6840; [www.cdbpr.com](http://www.cdbpr.com))

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## THE RELATIONSHIP OF FRAMING & ISSUES / CRISIS MANAGEMENT

"Altho it could be argued that practitioners *implicitly* engage in framing of positions, explicit framing-based approaches to understanding crisis & issues mgmt are absent from the literature. This is ironic since researchers concerned with social movement org's -- the activists who are often targets of issues mgmt initiatives -- have already developed considerable theory related to the importance of framing," notes the Hallahan-Steele framing study (last week's pr). It draws these conclusions to help practitioners keep abreast of framing usage:

- Crises & issues are social constructions that exist primarily in terms of how they are *framed*

Framing a problem in a favorable way is a fundamental strategy that must be addressed by crisis & issues managers early in the response period

- Official sources enjoy an advantage in the early phases of a crisis or issue, particularly when media & others are still in the discovery phase & the primary emphasis is merely to identify the extent of the problem

The framing of crises & issues is subject to change, with the passage of time. A critical issue confronting an organization involved in crisis or issues management is whether to alter the original framing of an issue in

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order to take advantage of the changing environment & framing challenges

**Media are prone to engage in diagnostic framing after initial descriptions of problems, which might require organizations to aggressively defend their framing, or to transform their original framing**

**Claims-makers create issues by framing social problems in ways that are in opposition to or different from the dominant framing found in a society. Such claims-makers often position themselves as victims of a social problem or issues created by others, & find it advantageous to attribute blame to others.**

**Frame contests are most likely to culminate when issues are being heard in the public policy arena, at times policy-makers are in a position to allocate resources or realign policies that favor particular frame contestants**

**Despite the best efforts to maintain control over how an issue is framed, the process is often beyond the control of the organization if it is unable to avoid inadvertence error (when error is inadvertent but org'n doesn't get that across)**

(More from Kirk Hallahan, Dep't of Journalism & Technical Com'n, Colorado State U, Fort Collins 80523-1785; e-mail: hallahan@lamar.colostate.edu)

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## IS SPORTSMANIA IN DECLINE, SINCE ALL MANIAS DO END ?

A *WashPost* poll finds 72% of Marylanders oppose using tax dollars to build football stadiums for the Washington Redskins & Baltimore Ravens. Similar opposition has surfaced in several cities (prx 3/9). Also consider:

- Nike is now seen by many as more a pariah than a glamour leader, based on the way it treats foreign workers, realization that spending \$175 for sneakers is asinine & resistance-stiffening comments by its CEO -- and a push from Doonesbury
- Even sportswriters find the overcommercialization too much. Some choice quotes from these usual athletic acolytes around the nation

¶ "Over at Your-Name-Here Arena " begins a column in the *SFChronicle*

¶ "Let's talk about the greedy hypocrites in charge of the Rose Bowl, which yesterday became the latest sports entity to announce it was selling out. The last bowl game not to prostitute itself for a sponsor will now be known as 'the Rose Bowl presented by AT&T.' You should hear the brass congratulate themselves about not changing the name to 'The AT&T Bowl.'" (Portsmouth, NH, *Herald*)

¶ "How about we catch a game over at the Nations Bank Vault presented by the good people of Jiffy-Lube in cooperation with the fine owner-operators of your neighborhood Burger King restaurants, sponsored in part by Coca-Cola, AT&T, General Motors, Reebok and Gatorade." (The State, Columbia, S.C.)

