**Framing Our Issues Smartly Can Win Public Acceptance and Avoid Problems**

by Glen Anderson (360) 491-9093 [**glenanderson@integra.net**](mailto:glenanderson@integra.net)

**Understand this definition of framing:**

**“Frames” are clusters of consistent archetypes and narratives help people to process information. These “frames” strongly influence how the public understand political issues. Because each “frame” is a deeply held preconception, it interferes with helping a person receive and accept new information that contradicts the exiting “frame.”**

Notice that this definition says a frame is a “PRE-conception.” That means BEFORE thinking. It taps into something deeper than rationality.

Some people frame issues deliberately. Some people unwittingly fall into traps. This essay discusses examples of each. **If we understand framing and “re-framing,” we can make a lot more progress on issues we care about.**

**Why framing is crucially important:**

Right-wing politicians who serve big business and oppresses ordinary people (especially vulnerable demographic groups) lie to the voters by framing themselves as “populists” even though they hurt most of the population. Mainstream news media go along with this and identify those right-wing elitists as “populists.”

**I’ll mention other examples later in this article.**

For ALL of the issues we care about (economic justice, peace, social justice, climate, etc.), we need to use smart framing and “re-frame” the stuff that the people who disagree with us have put into the public arena (politics, news, etc.).

When we reach out to the public, we have to “re-frame” the public’s existing frames and help them accept our new frames so people can see reality our way. When we develop our campaign strategies and tactics, we must think strategically and creatively and re-frame the issues so the public will understand them in our way.

The concept of “framing” was popularized a few years ago by George Lakoff, a linguist who says that the way we are wired will affect how we perceive the messages we receive. He says that conservatives have cleverly used framing, but liberals and progressives rarely do.

**“Framing” is altogether different from “spin.”** “Framing” taps into long-term ways of how we understand reality. “Spin” is merely a short-term manipulation. “Framing” is deeper and longer-lasting. “Framing” is about your worldview – how you perceive reality, including unconscious and deeply embedded perceptions of reality.

**Examples of Framing and Re-Framing**

* The U.S. has a powerful self-image that our nation is a beacon of liberty and the light of the world, the very model of freedom and democracy and enlightenment. Given this “frame,” what U.S. foreign policy assumptions and behaviors arise? This leads to “American exceptionalism,” the assumption that the U.S. has a God-given right to boss around the rest of the world. This framing allows the U.S. to overthrow other nations’ governments (including many democracies) if those governments are not subservient to the U.S.’s political and economic elites.
* Traditional American patriotism promotes the popular frame that “WE” are the “good guys,” and “WE” are superior to the few “bad guys” who need to be punished. This frame leads to brutal policing of “WE” white people against people of color, and politicians promoting fear of crime in order to promote brutal policing and racial injustice. This frame also leads to the U.S. imprisoning more people than any other country on earth.
* The powerful frame that supports war leads to a “War on Drugs,” which is horribly destructive and wastes money, just like our military wars. Civilized nations frame drug use as a public health issues, so they have cheaper, more humane and more effective public policies, while the U.S. militarizes our police and – especially since the Nixon era – has used drugs as an excuse to hurt people of color. This persists even though alcohol causes more crime and more health problems than the illegal drugs, and even though tobacco kills more people than illegal drugs. The “War on Drugs” frame and the frames about crime keep our nation stuck in policies that do not work and make it harder to solve the real problems. Fortunately, some people are working hard to “re-frame” drugs away from a crime frame a public health frame. If the American people would see drug use as a public health issue we could solve the problems.
* The U.S.’s wars in Afghanistan and Iraq quickly became unpopular, so the war-hawks could not convince people to “support the wars.” Instead, they re-framed the issue to “support the troops.” This bullied the public into allowing the wars to continue because they did not want to be perceived as negative toward the troops. Actually, sending troops into war (where they could be injured or killed) does not support them. The war-hawks’ reframing allowed the stupid wars to continue for twenty years.
* From autumn 2002 into 2003 Bush/Cheney whipped Americans into fear about “Weapons of Mass Destruction” that Iraq did not have, but people ignored the U.S.’s use of artillery shells with uranium tips that do spread radioactivity in Iraq. Also, despite the term “depleted uranium,” these weapons are still highly radioactive. Also, the U.S. has thousands of nuclear weapons, which also are “Weapons of Mass Destruction,” but American war-hawks never complain about those WMDs. They framed WMDs as Iraq’s sin but not ours.
* The Israeli-Palestinian conflict should focus on human rights for Palestinians, but years ago our government re-framed that as another front on the so-called “War on Terrorism.” Also, religious beliefs have led the U.S. to blindly support whatever the government of Israel does, no matter how cruel, violent or illegal under international law. This religious framing is powerful.
* For a number of years conservatives have lambasted “the liberal news media.” This frame succeeded in causing people to be skeptical of news that puts conservatives in a bad light. Also, references to “the liberal news media” have caused the media to go on the defensive and move rightward politically.
* For many years we have heard conservatives lambaste “Big Government.” Actually, they oppose only those governmental behaviors that would regulate big business’s pollution, safety standards, etc. Conservatives WANT “Big Government” behaviors such as wars, prisons, surveillance, and now micro-managing women’s intimate health decisions, and promoting right-wing religious dogma as public policy. The George W. Bush administration promoted a number of very serious power grabs by the federal government: the PATRIOT Act, the Total Information Awareness program, and so forth.
* The economy has been framed largely as how well the stock market is doing. News headlines focus on the Dow Jones average of a few dozen industrial stocks while ignoring locally owned small businesses. Also, every newspaper has a Business page, but none have a Labor page. These kinds of framing biases implicitly urge ALL Americans, including the working class and poor, to identify with the well-being of the investing class instead of the working class and small local entrepreneurs.
* Even the stock market reporting is framed to support capitalism. When the stock market goes up news reports cheer how well capitalism is working, and when the stock market goes down the news reports also cheer capitalism by reporting that investors were doing “profit-taking.” News reporting frames capitalism as a success either way.
* When a murder occurs, news media and politicians often frame the defendants as “monsters.” We’ve all seen enough monster movies to show that the movie plot must end by killing the monsters, not putting them in jail. Therefore, when murderers are framed as “monsters,” this already dictates the death penalty as the only solution.
* For several decades we have heard conservatives frighten the public by talking about “the homosexual agenda.” They make it sound secretive and sinister. Conservatives keep tapping into frames that make us afraid of people who are different from ourselves and need to be stamped out.
* Conservatives talk about the “tax burden” and “tax relief.” Why do they use these words? What frames are they tapping into? A “burden” is something heavy on your back that weighs you down. You want “relief” by removing that “burden.” These frames directly push the public and politicians to want to cut taxes.
* When our nation was founded, we had a War Department, but in 1947 the U.S. changed the “Department of War” to the “Department of Defense.” Throughout most of our nation’s history we had very few foreign wars, but afterre-framing the military agency’s name to refer to “Defense,” we have had many dozens of wars all over the world. Their re-framing fooled the public. We need to re-frame it back again.
* A great many people – even including many peace activists – refer to “defense spending” or “the defense budget.” We must stop using the war-hawks’ framing and call it “military spending” and “the military budget.” Decades ago some of us met with our U.S. House member and each time he used the “defense” term I interrupted and corrected him. I had to do that about five or six times during our meeting before I had trained him properly.
* “Greenwashing” and “astroturf” are deceptive problems caused by industry groups. They have learned to use misleading names (“greenwashing”) to mask their true purposes. They create phony “astroturf” organizations that deceive people by sounding “grassrootsy” but are really deceptive fronts for industry propaganda. Some organizations titled “Citizens for .....” are really “astroturf” front groups to promote industry agendas. A local “Affordable Housing” coalition is really the builders wanting to avoid paying for the infrastructure their new houses cause. A few years ago British Petroleum changed their name to “BP” and launched a public relations campaign saying they were now “Beyond Petroleum,” when actually they were aggressively promoting more oil drilling and sales. President George W. Bush created a “Healthy Forests Initiative,” which was really a scam to promote more logging that would hurt forests.

**How to re-frame:**

“Re-framing” can help people understand and feel the realities in new ways.

“Re-framing” can bridge the gap between mainstream portrayals of the issues and the new solutions we are promoting.

Let’s create organizations’ names and devise our strategies that will use framing insights effectively. Let’s affirm our society’s best values and culture. For example, a few years ago the Olympia City Council majority wanted to spend our public tax dollars on a conference center, but they did not want to put it up to a public vote. The progressives organized vigorously to demand a vote. The progressives framed the controversy in terms of **democracy** and **our right to vote**. The progressives created an organization called **“Public Funds for Public Purposes.”** We defeated that scam, and in November the voters replaced those City Council members.

The U.S.’s endless wars are waged – and the U.S.’s mania for nuclear weapons leads to global suicide – in the name of our nation’s “security.” But instead of simply accepting the common notion of “national security,” we must **redefine** the concept of “security” in ways that are sensible, practical and ethical. I posted to my blog an alternative understanding of “TRUE Security.” It would make us more secure – and the rest of the world more peaceful too. See an article I wrote about this here: [**https://parallaxperspectives.org/how-to-achieve-peace-and-true-security**](https://parallaxperspectives.org/how-to-achieve-peace-and-true-security) See my proposal here: [**https://parallaxperspectives.org/replace-the-national-security-scheme-with-true-security**](https://parallaxperspectives.org/replace-the-national-security-scheme-with-true-security)

This different perspective helps us re-frame “security” to help us change many alternatives to the status quo of public policy. Our nation would be more secure if we were to end homelessness and poverty, provide high quality health care for every person, protect the environment and climate, support public school teachers by paying them well and treating them well, and so forth.

Framing pays attention to people’s deeply held worldviews, values and feelings, so we need to devise strategies that address those instead of bogging down in “wonky” abstractions that confuse people. Liberals tend to over-intellectualize issues (*e.g*., by providing too many statistics). But facts that don’t fit the public’s current frame simply bounce off without making a lasting impression, while the frame remains intact! How could we frame our issues without relying so much on abstract intellectualism and statistics?

Martin Luther King, Jr., and the whole Civil Rights Movement framed their issues skillfully! The Civil Rights Movement’s original constituency was the Black church. They used many Biblical metaphors and images – especially related to the Exodus, liberation from oppression, and journeying to the Promised Land. This resonated also to White Christians and to Jews and other people who knew about those biblical stories.

King also framed the Civil Rights Movement in very well grounded American ways – especially as helping Black people participate in the American Dream, in fulfilling America’s promise to all people, and in showing the rest of the world that America can actually live up to the values our nation claims. He was very explicit about these, so he helped other Americans see the Civil Rights Movement as truly an American phenomenon that deserved support.

Suppose you are organizing a movement to cut military spending and use the savings to meet human needs. You could frame the current budget priorities as **hurting the American people who need health care, housing, education, a clean environment, and so forth**. You could frame these suffering Americans as **victims of excessive military spending**. You could frame your campaign as “we the people” vs. the military-industrial complex or “we the people” vs. “the elites.”

Consider using different frames and strategies for different constituencies. Identify each constituency we want to reach. For each constituency, which frames and strategies will reach them and move them toward our direction?

Several times every year I conduct a free online series of workshops to strengthen people’s skills in grassroots organizing for any issue they care about. The insights, strategies and resources are easily transferable across issues. **Contact me if you’d like to be notified of upcoming opportunities.**

Glen Anderson (360) 491-9093 [**glenanderson@integra.net**](mailto:glenanderson@integra.net)