



How to Frame a Story: Q&A with Cristian Lupsa

A student at the University of Missouri, Cristian Lupsa struggled to find a frame for a package of stories he was writing on the Islamic faith, the Muslim community and the challenges facing both. When he finally surrendered to the process of finding a frame, the frame found him.

Q. What is the frame for this package?

A. When I began working on the anchor piece of the package, "Struggle and surrender," I had an editor-given frame around it: What's wrong with Islam? I cringed every time I thought about it. Sure, some might see that as a valid story, but I feared that starting under that banner wouldn't send me down too many new roads.

I didn't want to frame the story as "us vs. them." That had been done countless times. Why do Muslims hate America? Is Islam violent? These continue to be popular questions, but they contain an implicit message – that America has it all figured out and it carries none of the burden. I thought it to be a condescending and, to a certain degree, an overly nationalistic frame.

Q. How did you arrive at the frame for each story?

A. The process that led me to find the suitable frame for my stories was long and chaotic. I had looked for new ways of framing in a couple of longer stories before, but I didn't have a process. The only guideline that I used was not to settle for the first idea that came my way. I later learned from my mentors Tom Rosenstiel and Bill Kovach (authors of *The Elements of Journalism*) that this is simply called humility – being open-minded enough to accept that any bit of information could change your whole story/frame.

Q. Describe the frame you ultimately chose.

A. I wanted to frame the story as a struggle rather than a conflict. A struggle implies dilemmas, unanswered questions, complexity and a search for meaning and solutions. There was another element to this frame and it resulted from my background. I am Romanian, so it was easier for me to extend this frame to the world rather than to center it on America.

I think a lot of stories carry this implicit frame of America at the center, because they are written by American journalists. Similarly, it's very hard for me to write about Romania and remove myself from it. The result of this

broader frame is that I used a lot of historical information and political interpretations of violence and religion which have made the story more provocative and (hopefully) more original.

Q. So how does that translate to a story on Islam?

A. Dear reader, here is the story of our encounter with Islam, a complex faith and culture that is now in every American's home because of world politics and war. You cannot ignore it because you need to understand why television is showing you dead soldiers and diplomats butting heads on political concepts and the merits of systems ranging from democracy to theocracy. You need to know that your Muslim neighbor worships the same God as the Muslim who just blew himself up in Baghdad, but that the culture and the politics have skewed the interpretation of the religion the latter uses as reason for sacrifice. There are people in our community who have seen this up close. They struggled with juggling culture, religion and politics. Some did it by taking a trip through history, philosophy and theology. They question the teachings of religious leaders who claimed to own the truth and embrace their own Islam.

Q. How did the frame you chose influence your interviews and your writing?

A. Choosing the people to interview was not easy. We didn't set out to create a 20-page special section and this made it difficult. From the beginning, it became clear that a story about Islam wasn't going to have much local flavor. It was broad, explanatory and it would have been unfair to have local Muslims act as historical and political authorities in describing the struggles within Islam.

That's when the idea of profiling a few different characters came about. Again, I didn't know who they were going to be and so I spent time talking to many people without knowing if I was going to use them in the stories. I am a shy person and I sometimes get nervous asking average people to allow me into their lives.

This became even harder in this story when I was "character hunting" without knowing where it would take me. To identify the people that would add something to the package, I spent time at the mosque, I spent time with people in the Muslim Students Association, and I read the clips.

Writing the story was tough but it had to do with organizational issues more than with framing. Once we had settled on this struggle frame, the issue became how to fit all the history and context into the piece without turning it into an academic paper. It also had to have some local flavor to it so there would be a Columbia [Missouri] voice represented in this global overview.

Q. How do you use frames in the work you do today?

A. I put a good deal of time into the preliminary stage of reporting when I have the luxury to do so. I don't like repetition so I try to find new ways to get a story.

I don't think there is a secret to framing. Just taking a few minutes to answer questions such as "What is the story I'm trying to write?" and "What is the story my community hasn't heard?" will make you more conscious of what your frame is or should be.

It's also very important to realize that biases and every journalist's personal biography will greatly influence the way we tell stories. It's who we are and it's not something we need to suppress, but something we need to acknowledge and be conscious of.

Q. Anything else you'd like to tell us about the process of framing those stories?

A. I think it's really important to know that I had the luxury of time on these stories. I spent five months on the reporting and writing and I worked with five photographers, two graphic designers and a layout artist, not to mention a couple of editors. We met regularly and discussed the direction of the stories, the illustration, the goals we wanted to accomplish, etc. I know that in today's media, this type of work is the exception, not the norm and I want to make sure people understand we were conscious of this.