



Finding A Frame: Q&A with Tom Warhover

Framing is one of the most important reporting concepts to learn, says Tom Warhover, executive editor of innovation at the University of Missouri.

Q. What is framing?

A. It's really no more complicated, in a sense, than the picture inside your head. When you think about something, you create a picture and that's a frame. It's no more complicated, but no less powerful because once you get that picture in your head, it's hard to get out. We have a formal definition for framing, but that's the easiest definition.

Q. How does framing work?

A. In news stories, a reporter has biases, preconceptions and former experiences that influence the framing of a story. Before he or she picks up the phone and makes the first call, there's already a notion that's driven by all those things.

The frame begins long before the story begins in many ways and that's where the default frame comes in. For example, a default frame could be something like politics. The default frame for politics is usually a horserace and if you have that default frame going in, it's going to dictate the questions you ask, the information you gather and the people you talk to.

The point is to ask: Is this the right frame that is best for our readers and will it get us closer to understanding, rather than just getting the facts?

Q. How does a reporter decide which frame is best?

A. A lot of that has to do with the norms of the newsroom, the influence of the assigning editor and a reporter's own perceptions of what the story is, what it's for and what it does. For example, if I have a reporter who just says, "I do the facts man," you get one type of frame compared to a reporter who wants to save the world.

All those things come into play, but too often none of them come into play because reporters don't think about those things. They say, "It's news." Too often, there's this perception of what's important or what could be important and what should be.

Q. How do you teach students how to frame a news story?

All materials © Covering Communities.

A. You're trying to explain framing, so that students understand when they go in that this thing exists. Beyond that, students need to understand what their values are and what are the values of their newsroom. As far as teaching framing as a concept, I use that classic picture that looks like an old woman with a big nose and chin when seen from one side and a beautiful, young girl when seen from the other side. The idea is to practice seeing different things in the set of facts you have.

Q. Why is it difficult for reporters to understand that they shape the story?

A. It's a defense mechanism. They think, "If we're just reporting the facts, then we're not responsible for the facts." There's also an assumption that there's only one way to do journalism. It used to be said that the cure to what ails us is to do better journalism. It's hard to let go of that concept and to realize there are more needs.

Q. What are the ways to frame a story?

A. The way that is consistent with your values. There may not be the choice of right or wrong. There may just be a choice of a different cut on the world. For example, look at any street sign that says there's a curve up in the road ahead. And then sit down and look at it, it actually points up and over. The literal truth of the sign is different than the way we approach it.

Q. How are stories most often framed?

A. The default is conflict. More often than not, they're negative.

Q. Why is this?

A. It's an ingrained culture. Controversy sometimes means a competition between goods, not good against evil. So you can have controversy without conflict. You can have controversy within one person. You don't have to say this person is a good person.

The question at hand is not "What are the conditions that got us into this shape?" It's "Who's next and where are we going to find the next villain?" You can ask both questions. If you see the story from two different ways, you can go after two different pieces of the story.