



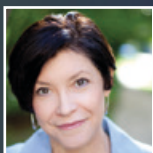
Health News and Responsibility:

How Frames Create Blame

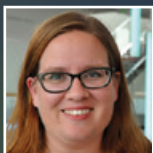
Lesa Hatley Major
and Stacie Meihaus Jankowski

Who the public blames for health problems determines who the public believes is responsible for solving those health problems. Health policies targeting the broader public are the most effective way to improve health. The research approach described in this book will increase public support for critical health policies. The authors systematically organized and analyzed 25 years of thematic and episodic framing research in health news to create an approach to reframe responsibility in health news in order to gain public support for health policies. They apply their method to two of the top health issues in world—obesity and mental health—and conclude by discussing future research and plans for working with other health scholars, health practitioners, and journalists.

“In this long-overdue book, Lesa Hatley Major and Stacie Meihaus Jankowski reassert the central role that news media play in circulating and forming the frames of reference that people, professionals, and policy-makers rely on to understand, address, and solve pressing health-related problems. Through empirical analyses of framing in the health communication literature and through their own empirical demonstrations on the topics of obesity and depression, Major and Jankowski provide a nuanced account of an information environment in which seminal frames—thematic and episodic—interweave with the subtle language of gain/loss and responsibility/blame. On display, too, are the authors’ own professional experiences in journalism, which bring to the volume an authoritative rendering of newsroom norms and professional practices that shape journalists’ pivotal story-telling role. This fully conceived, richly researched, and timely book belongs on the shelf of anyone interested in health communication.”—Paul D’Angelo, *Professor of Media and Political Communication, The College of New Jersey*



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Health News and Responsibility



Lee B. Becker
GENERAL EDITOR

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Lesa Hatley Major and
Stacie Meihaus Jankowski

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Preface

Several years ago I was presenting my research on the effects of episodic and thematic frames in health news. The audience was colleagues, including professors and practitioners, and graduate students from the journalism program at Indiana University in Bloomington. As I was explaining my work defining episodic and thematic frames and their connection to attribution of responsibility, I watched the facial expressions of the people attending my lecture.

Like most people, who present or perform in front of audiences, I was trying to read the room. Searching the faces for comprehension, confusion, agreement, disagreement, etc. I noticed one of my colleagues, a Pulitzer prize winning journalist, nodding in agreement with how I was describing thematic and episodic framing. I was explaining how journalists use these frames in news to cover health issues by focusing on individual stories of success or failure sometimes combined with details that offer a broader context about these same issues—statistics about how many people are affected, and how these issues could be addressed by policy. He remained genuinely interested throughout the presentation.

After the talk was finished, this colleague approached me to discuss my research. He started with the comment, “that’s exactly what we do. That’s how we cover issues.” It was my turn to nod my head in agreement and answer “I know.” I worked as a journalist before entering academia. I had the same reaction when I first read Iyengar’s 1991 book, *Is Anyone Responsible: How Television Frames*

Political Issues, about episodic and thematic frames and attribution of responsibility. My dissertation advisor, another former journalist, assigned the book for me to read. She said, “You are going to like this. He gets us.” I did like it. It made sense to me. When I read it, I realized I knew what these frames were because as a journalist I used them all of the time.

My experience as a journalist influences my work as a health communication researcher. Journalists use thematic and episodic frames in news coverage. As researchers we need to examine the frames journalists use in their stories. Even if these frames are not shiny and new. Like most social issues, successful attempts to address public health problems involve public policy solutions. Public opinion support is necessary for public policy. Public support for policy requires the public to understand society’s role in solving problems.

Thematic and episodic frames are directly connected to attribution of responsibility. Along with the who, what, when, where, and why in news stories, identifying the causes of problems, and who or what is responsible for solving problems remains one of the most important functions of journalists. Attribution of responsibility influences the political agenda, public opinion, and public support for policies dealing with issues and problems.

In this book, we examine 25 years of research on thematic and episodic frames in health news. We have two goals in this project. First, to examine and explain what we know about the research on these frames in health to this point, and to provide a framework for research on thematic and episodic frames in health news in terms of public opinion support for health policy.

We plan to share our work with other health communication scholars, public health scholars and practitioners, and journalists reporting on health issues. All of us need to work together to understand the process and power of news frames. In many ways, that is where the real work begins.

Lesa Hatley Major



Acknowledgments

The research presented in this book could not have been conducted without the support and assistance of key individuals and institutions. Christian Potter and Kim Baker provided invaluable help developing the coding categories used to analyze the content in the academic journal articles on thematic and episodic frames in news. As a research assistant, Christian was instrumental during the content analysis phase of this project. We are indebted to him for all of his thorough and thoughtful work.

Financial support for two of the experiments presented in this text was provided by Indiana University, Bloomington, through the Faculty Research Support Program. We would like to thank Dr. Lee Becker and are honored to be included in his series—Mass Communication and Journalism with Peter Lang Publishing. Also, we want to thank our editor, Dr. Erika Hendrix and everyone at Peter Lang Publishing for all of their support during this entire process.

Lesia would also like to acknowledge the following: Working with Stacie on this project was one of the most rewarding professional experiences of my career. I truly mean it when I say this work would not have been possible without her. Her insight not only added to the intellectual integrity of our research but provided the depth that could lead to real changes in how journalists and researchers do their jobs.

Professor Amy Reynolds provided much needed advice when I decided to write this book. I value her honesty, humor and friendship. I'd like to thank my dear friend Tracey Setze for her encouragement and support.

I'd like to thank my parents—Donald and Mikell Sue Hatley—for helping me see the possibilities in life, always supporting me through the good and difficult times, and never making me color within the lines when I was little. My brother, John C. Hatley, always believed his big sis could do just about anything—that means the world to me.

Finally, I want to thank my husband, Allen C. Major for his unwavering love and support. He makes me laugh every day. For 19 years, he has been by my side with positive energy continually reminding me, "You got this!"

Stacie would like to recognize the following: Lesa has been my teacher, mentor, friend, and colleague for more than a decade, and working on this book together has been my favorite project we have done. It has truly been a joy as well as a revelation. Lesa is at the heart of this work, always pushing for deeper understanding. It's this drive that will help uncover the knowledge researchers and journalists can use to be more effective.

I am fortunate to have supportive colleagues at Northern Kentucky University's College of Informatics, especially within the journalism program. Furthermore, I am thankful for the kindness and support of friends, particularly Jessica Birthisel, Anne Blandford, Spring-Serenity Duvall, Lori Henson, and Rosemary Pennington. My sister, Jennie Goetz, also is a constant source of joy and comfort.

I am blessed with a supportive, loving, and hilarious family—parents Don and Paula Meihaus, siblings Don, Stephen, and Jennie, and an entire extended family, particularly my grandfather, Paul Tipton, who has not let a conversation go by without asking about this book. Finally, I am profoundly grateful for the love of my sons, Luke and Nathan, as well as my husband, Hal, who all celebrate with me the smallest of successes and buoy me through rough waters.

Introduction: This Is a Health Communication Book?

Geoffrey Rose advised epidemiologists that “(s)ociety is not merely a collection of individuals but also a collectivity, and the behavior and health of its members are profoundly influenced by its collective characteristics and social norms” (2, p. 62).

Hundreds of health news stories are read and viewed daily across the globe. While individuals may turn to multiple outlets for health information, news remains one of the most important providers of health knowledge. All health news stories use some combination of episodic and thematic framing. Reporters tell stories about an individual’s health problem or provide details about a single event involving health (episodic coverage) and/or discuss a health problem more broadly offering context by focusing on prevalence, societal causes, and treatments including health policy (thematic coverage). These are the frames journalists use in the real world. Understanding how journalists construct these frames, and how these frames influence audience members, is critical for anyone involved in health communication, including health reporters.

Shanto Iyengar introduced thematic and episodic news frames in his 1991 book, *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues*. These news frames provide the audience with critical information about the causes of problems and who or what is responsible for solving problems. This attribution of responsibility influences how individuals think about social problems including health—who or what is causing the problem and who or what is responsible for solving it.

Attributions of responsibility are critical elements of all social knowledge (Iyengar, 1991). Iyengar found news stories using an episodic frame led audience members to blame problems on the person in the story, while a thematic-framed story did the opposite. Thematic news coverage led audience members to think about problems in a broader context. In turn, audience members would consider societal conditions as problems requiring societal solutions like public health policies.

We began this research project thinking we would analyze all the academic research on thematic and episodic frames in news coverage of social problems for the past 25 years. This time period covered the 25 years since the 1991 publication of Iyengar's seminal work. After collecting the sample for our study, we realized that seventy percent of the research was on health news. While we had expected to find more studies on thematic and episodic frames in news coverage, we were not surprised that health communication dominated this research area. We adapted and focused our research on thematic and episodic frames in health news.

This book is not an examination of the arguments for how to define framing research, how to operationalize frames, or how to measure frames in terms of the entire field of framing research. While we appreciate the academic conversations taking place in our field, our work focuses on episodic and thematic frames in health news specifically. We provide analyses of research on these frames spanning 25 years. In doing this, we bring to the table our experiences as working journalists and academics who study framing in health news.

Both of us worked as journalists before moving to academia. We understood episodic and thematic framing in practice long before we studied framing effects or media content. We do not expect what we say here to rewrite the framing paradigm but we offer a new perspective for organizing the existing research on these frames in health news followed by a framework for moving forward.

We think our approach will help researchers, journalists, and practitioners make changes beneficial to individuals as well as overall societal health. Our fellow framing scholars' work is indispensable in our efforts.

In Chapter 2, we provide a brief overview of Iyengar's (1991) book, *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues*. The academic research on thematic and episodic frames is dominated by studies on health news. In Chapter 3, we discuss three primary reasons for this occurrence. First, framing research has become increasingly popular in communication research (Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015). Because it is a multidisciplinary paradigm, it allows for the holistic study of media and its four elements of the communication process: the sender, the receiver, the message, and culture (Berlo, 1960). The connection among these four elements and thematic and episodic frames is key in terms of their linkage to audiences and attribution of responsibility for health issues and persuasion of public opinion support

and action. Second, news coverage of health issues has increased dramatically during the past fifty years. Despite significant changes in the media landscape that allow people immediate access to health-related information online, news remains influential in shaping how we think about and discuss health (Walsh-Childers, Braddock, Rabaza & Schwitzer, 2018; Major, 2018). Third, health communication research in academia has developed as an important field over the last thirty-five years. Scholars in this area investigate the roles performed by human and mediated communication in health care delivery, health promotion, and journalism while benefiting from ample funding opportunities not readily available to other areas of communication research. We posit these trends along with Iyengar's (1991) introduction of thematic and episodic frames as a way to categorize news frames and study their effects accounts for the prevalence of scholarly research on thematic and episodic frames in health news. We discuss this premise in Chapter 3.

We collected and analyzed academic research on thematic and episodic frames in health news published in peer-reviewed journals since 1991. The studies we included in our analysis fall into two categories: ones using thematic and episodic framing definitions in the literature review only, and ones operationalizing thematic and episodic frames for measurement or testing. In Chapter 4, we present the findings in two stages. We cover the results from an analysis of all the studies included in our sample, followed by a separate look at the research articles that tested/measured thematic and episodic frames—actual operationalization. Our findings show which health topics have been investigated, how much research has been conducted on specific health issues, which journals have published this research, when research was conducted, and countries where most of this research has been conducted before moving to more in-depth analysis of how thematic and episodic frames have been studied, both conceptually and operationally.

Using our findings from a content analysis of the research on thematic and episodic frames in health news, in Chapter 5 we introduce the integrated process of framing approach as a way to organize and evaluate existing research on these frames. Also, we use this model to create a framework for developing research in this area. By applying the integrated process of framing to existing research we ascertained the strengths and weaknesses of the current literature on thematic and episodic frames. Finally, we propose several areas that need to be developed.

Using the integrated process model of framing, Chapter 6 examined the 45 studies that operationalized thematic and episodic. Using a qualitative analysis, this chapter discusses the ways these articles tackle the issues of journalists, policy, and recommendations for future studies. Although none of the 45 studies interviewed journalists, many of the studies talk about the roles and responsibilities of journalists as they consider the ways these attributes may or may not influence

framing. Considering the factors proposed in Chapter 5, this chapter also analyzes the ways current research has used elements of stigma, psychological reactance, emotions, civic behavior, and interaction effects.

Chapters 7 and 8 involve a discussion of the most used health issues in the studies that operationalized thematic and episodic frames: obesity and mental health. In Chapter 7, we examine the studies that involve obesity. In Chapter 8, we found mental illness to be one of the most used health issues in the studies that operationalized thematic and episodic frames. More specifically, several of these studies examined depression. In both chapters, we use the findings of these studies as a primer for our own work on thematic and episodic frames in depression studies. These chapters present the findings of five experiments, three on obesity and two on depression. These experiments examine the ways framing impacts or interacts with civic engagement, emotions, psychological reactance, and stigma.

While we are interested in the effects of episodic and thematic news frames on behavior change to improve individual health, our larger mission in this study is examining how these frames influence support for health policy benefiting population health.

In this book, we present a way to organize and evaluate existing research on these frames as a whole process—beginning with the journalists who develop and create the health news stories to the framing effects leading to public action and everything in between. We combine an existing process model of framing with our original work to achieve this goal. As we will explain, this is the first step in our process. We present significant findings and offer insight into what we know so far about thematic and episodic frames and how they influence support for policy. We conclude with our ideas on the direction of future research based on what we have learned and some initial findings of investigations following that direction.

We appreciate and understand the time and effort scholars put forth to conduct the research we analyzed for this project. Both of us know the challenges involved in developing and undertaking scholarly research. By examining the whole, research on thematic and episodic frames in health news, we offer a clear view of what might be missing in the framing process of increasing public support for health policy. We understand how lack of resources and certain aspects university tenure and promotion might prohibit what we are suggesting researchers could pursue to move research on episodic and thematic frames forward. We realize as thorough as we tried to be in collecting scholarly research articles for this project, we are bound to have missed some journal articles.

Also, having worked as reporters at the local level, both of us know what it is like to have deadlines to meet when covering stories. We understand being a one-man-band when reporting, the idea that sometimes the source you get is the source

available due to time constraints. Journalists face incredible obstacles in terms of labor force cuts and hostile working environments in the U.S. and more so around the world. A 2017 survey Gallup and the Knight Foundation found Americans strongly believe news media have an important role in democracy—providing the public with information they need and holding the powerful accountable. As we write this text, the need for accurate reporting has never been more dire.

In the midst of these turbulent times, gaining a better understanding of how to effectively communicate information about health policy may not seem as important as other topics. We believe the appetite for this information exists. Around the globe, we all face significant challenges to our health and well-being, and there has never been a more important time for scholars from multiple disciplines, journalists, and the public to join together to deal with these serious threats. We hope the work we present in this text will be used to address risks to our public health like gun violence and climate change along with other significant health issues that require policy solutions.

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Good Pictures vs. Talking Heads: Iyengar's Episodic and Thematic Frames

Although those who are reading this volume may be familiar with Shanto Iyengar's book *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues*, we would like to provide a quick overview of the work for those who need a primer or review.

Iyengar's (1991) book proposed the way journalists frames stories matters for the ways audiences attribute responsibility for the causes and solutions of political issues. Iyengar specifically examined two types of storytelling frames—episodic and thematic. Iyengar argues news generally takes either an episodic or thematic frame. “The episodic news frame focuses on specific events or particular issues, while the thematic news frame places political issues and events in some general context” (Iyengar, 1991, p. 2). Episodic frames might detail the journey of an individual experiencing a health issue, focusing on their personal experience, while thematic frames might provide background about the health issue at large, with statistics explaining things like the national rate and cost of the issue. Iyengar said, “Visually, episodic reports make ‘good pictures,’ while thematic reports feature ‘talking heads’” (1991, p. 14).

Iyengar's two types of frames—thematic and episodic—are attractive for journalists and for journalism researchers. Journalists use these frames. For example, one way we, the authors of this book, learned how to write trend stories in our own journalism education was through deliberately pairing these frames—while we were taught to explain the statistics, research, predominance etc. about an issue, we

were told to create a more compelling story about the issue by adding to the more thematic writing an episodic example of a person who is experiencing the issue. One story model looks like this: the trend story started with an episodic section about our exemplar, went into a thematic section about the issue as a whole, and finished with an ending section that finished the story about the exemplar. These episodic portions of the story would, in theory, capture the audience's attention and give them a face of an issue that might be difficult to understand through just numbers.

Iyengar also acknowledged his content analysis on television news also found very few stories were only episodic or thematic, but rather a mixture of the two. However, he said a predominant frame emerged a majority of the time. His content analysis found TV news was highly episodic. Research on newspapers, some of which is discussed in this book, has also found that the newspaper medium is highly episodic (see, for example, Carlyle, Slater, & Chakroff, 2008).

Although the content analysis in Iyengar's book was important to capture the real-world explanation of thematic and episodic frames in political coverage on television news, the book turns to media effects of those frames. Iyengar used an experimental design to test the impact of frames on attribution of responsibility. His argument is throughout public opinion, attribution of responsibility matters for how we allocate resources and hold political figures accountable. He argues when people attribute more responsibility to individuals rather than political actors, it "decreases the public's control over their elected representatives and the policies they pursue" (Iyengar, 1991, p. 3).

Iyengar focused his research on political issues such as poverty, crime, and unemployment, examining attribution of responsibility based on thematic and episodic frames for these separate issues. He found generally when people encountered episodic frames, they were more likely to attribute responsibility to individuals, while those who encountered thematic frames were more likely to attribute responsibility to society.

It sounds simple.

It's not.

Throughout his work, Iyengar acknowledges the complexities of the attribution of responsibility paradigm, of testing responses to content while acknowledging the larger culture, of humans in general. We see differences in results based on who or what is in the stories; for example, individual causal attribution in stories about black crime was not affected by framing. Iyengar describes this effect as part of the impact of individual responsibility for black crime being a dominant

cultural judgment. Ericson (1993), in his review on Iyengar (1991), had a similar cultural critique even for the experiments that statistically supported Iyengar's thesis: "In essence, Iyengar exposed people with a lifetime of political socialization to a breathtaking hurricane of television news, then documented how their attributions, opinions, and attitudes might have become a little bent in the process" (p. 1461), arguing further that examining what happened to those ideas and attributions once the participants left the experiment was lost.

Iyengar saw differences in framing effects based on political ideology of the participants, the issue studied, issue salience, and agreement to the article's frames. Furthermore, we have seen other research, such as Stone (1989, 2002) and Nathanson (1999), examine the nuances of different types of blame and causality impacting the ways we think about issues. Focusing on causality here leaves out the multitude of research on other types of frames that interact with thematic and episodic to impact audiences (see, for example, Kahneman & Tversky, 1979, 1981). There are surely more variables impacting attribution of responsibility.

Although we acknowledge, as did Iyengar, these types of distinctions can impact responsibility attribution, the bottom line for the importance of Iyengar's (1991) work is the frames we see in the media are the frames that not only become the "pictures in our heads" (Lippmann, 1922), but also an influence on our political and social policy, our very way of life itself.

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