



A FrameWorks Institute FrameByte

June 2007

Analyzing A Thematic Article About Health Care Reform

Diane Benjamin, Fellow, FrameWorks Institute

Reading and watching media coverage of health care reform and scrutinizing that coverage can improve advocates' communication about the issue. While more frequently we find examples of what NOT to do, it is also helpful to look more closely at examples of good news coverage. In this FrameByte, we look at a thematic story about health care reform and identify what the authors do well. For more on the research background to these assessments, see the Public Issues Toolkit at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

First appearing in the Chicago Tribune in January 2007, "Health-Care Bandwagon Gets Rolling", by reporters Judith Graham and Michael Martinez, was reprinted in many other newspapers throughout the country. In contrast to the vast majority of reporting about health care reform, this article gets several things right.

1. It takes a thematic instead of episodic approach.

For almost a dozen years, conventional wisdom has dictated that far-reaching, national health-care reform wasn't possible in this country. But political winds are blowing in a strong new direction.

Now, states are seizing the initiative, challenging policy gridlock in Washington. Business groups are standing with labor unions and consumer activists and calling for reform. Even the insurance industry has advanced a proposal for universal coverage.

As a new wave of reform initiatives surges across the nation, Congress is showing interest in supporting state innovations and is likely to begin a renewed debate over which direction future national reforms should take.

This article opens immediately with a thematic statement, rather than the individual case story common in many such articles. Most news coverage of public issues, including health care reform, is *episodic*. Episodic news focuses on disconnected, random events or case studies, in contrast to *thematic* coverage, which is focused on trends, causes, and

solutions to social problems. How issues are covered matters; the more episodically health care is framed, the less likely it is that citizens will hold government and other civic institutions accountable for solving the problem. The more thematic and contextual the coverage, the more likely it is that citizens will see health care reform as appropriate to collective solutions.

2. It provides historical background about the issue.

Republicans are stepping forward with bold plans--a sign that previous partisan divides over health reform are weakening. This month, California GOP Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger made an enormous splash when he advanced a plan to cover 6.5 million uninsured residents of his state... Last week, organizations that squared off angrily over health care in the 1990s--including Families USA, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and America's Health Insurance Plans--stood together in Washington and announced a commitment to what they agree were much-needed expansions of medical coverage for children and low-income adults.

Without historical information about lack of Republican support for health reform in the past, the support from Gov. Schwarzenegger and former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney are less meaningful, and do not signal a shift in the political debate. In addition, understanding that organizations which were previously enemies are now working together helps the reader understand that the current policy environment differs from the situation in the early 1990's, the last time that the United States had a serious attempt to reform health care.

3. It discusses causality.

Driving the activity is a deepening sense of frustration over escalating medical costs and growing numbers of people without medical coverage, the underpinnings of the nation's health-care crisis. While these long-term trends aren't new, their impact on businesses' bottom lines, consumers' pocketbooks and medical providers' practices has worsened significantly, experts said.

Much too often, news coverage of health care reform dives into the details of reform legislation without ever discussing causality. This paragraph makes clear what is driving the push to reform health care, and what has changed recently. This helps readers understand why the problem matters now and why change is needed. It also helps dispel the idea that problems with the current health care system are intractable and permanent.

4. It places statistics in context.

If current trends continue, 56 million Americans will have no health insurance by 2013, up from 47 million today, according to a new report by AcademyHealth, a policy and research organization. Financial strains for millions of families are mounting as medical inflation far outstrips salary increases.

Enter the states, which began to plan new strategies when their revenues started to rebound a few years ago, making new spending possible...

Now, attention is riveted on California. The sheer ambition of Schwarzenegger's \$12 billion plan is breathtaking. As in Massachusetts, his proposal combines an employer mandate to provide insurance with an individual mandate to carry insurance. Low-income families would get financial assistance, and public medical programs would be expanded.

But the scope of the health problems in California is astounding: about 15 percent of the entire uninsured population of the U.S. lives in the state. Not surprisingly, the governor's plan has been greeted with acclaim and alarm.

In this section of the article, trends in uninsurance are presented with a context statement about medical inflation outstripping salary increases. While this is certainly not the only reason for the increasing rates, it doesn't leave the facts unsupported by context. The data about uninsured in California is also placed in its national context, so that readers can understand the scope of the problem. In this way, the \$12 billion dollar price tag of the reform plan is more understandable, as well as the intense reactions to it.

While the story ends with the obligatory anecdote of a low-income working family in California who cannot afford health care, the reader has already had an opportunity to understand more about the trends, history, context and future directions of health care reform in the United States. This understanding is likely to increase support for public solutions to the problem of health care coverage.