“Avoid crisis framing. Instead, emphasize solutions.”: Julie Sweetland of Frameworks Institute narrative change, issue framing, and normalizing conversations.

Rollo Romig
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Rollo Romig: Could you introduce yourself and give an overview of your work and what you’re currently doing?

Julie Sweetland: I’m Dr. Julie Sweetland, a sociolinguist and senior advisor at the Frameworks Institute, a nonprofit research organization. We focus on the communications aspects of social problems and develop empirical methods to shift public conversations on these issues. While much of what I'll discuss today isn't solely my personal research, I have contributed to it as part of our organization. Currently, I focus on public health and health equity, including adverse childhood experiences. We’ve recently conducted research with Johns Hopkins University on the narrative surrounding child sexual violence.

Rollo Romig: Can you provide an overview of the range of social problems Frameworks is tackling?

Julie Sweetland: Over our 25 years, Frameworks has studied about 50 different social issues. Our three main areas of focus are children and families, economic justice, and public health/ and health equity. However, we've addressed a wide range of topics, including climate change, immigration, and the social implications of artificial intelligence

We're best known for our work in early childhood development. Much of our early childhood work comes out of our longstanding partnership with the Harvard Center on the Developing Child and the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. We've I've also collaborated with organizations like Prevent Child Abuse America and the CDC Injury Center to address childhood adversity more comprehensively. Together, and with many other organizations, we've shifted the narrative around children from one of vulnerability to one of potential and brain development over the past two decades.

Rollo Romig: Who would you say is the audience for your work?

Julie Sweetland: We primarily work with other mission-driven organizations. We don't run campaigns ourselves; instead, we support researchers, advocates, and systems leaders working on specific social issues. My speaking and writing are usually directed toward nonprofit professionals. We also collaborate with cultural producers—such as artists, filmmakers, or museums—to help integrate better-framed narratives into media and cultural spaces. While the general public is our ultimate audience, we focus on equipping communicators and storytellers to convey these issues effectively.

Rollo Romig: What would you say makes your organization distinct among groups who are maybe doing similar sorts of things?

Julie Sweetland: FrameWorks offers two distinctive strengths. First is our breadth across issues. Many peer organizations focus on a single issue, while we cover a wide range, allowing us to see how narratives on one topic can impact others. This helps us steer clear of narratives that might benefit one cause but harm related movements.

Also, we have an unparalleled research base, grounded in a deep understanding of narrative, culture, and framing. Our team includes anthropologists, linguists, sociologists, political scientists, and psychologists—expertise you don't often see in a communications organization. We believe the nonprofit sector should apply the same rigor to communications as it does to policy-making, as effective framing creates the foundation for successful policy and program work.

Rollo Romig: Can you give an example of a narrative that's helpful in one part of a campaign but counterproductive in another?

Julie Sweetland: This happens a lot in human services, where highlighting one sympathetic group can inadvertently cast others as less deserving. For example, framing a story around vulnerable children often leads audiences to focus on "bad" or inattentive parents. Similarly, organizations may focus on seniors, veterans, or women fleeing abuse—groups seen as "deserving"—which implies that others might be less worthy of support.

A clear example is the opioid crisis narrative. The focus on "upstanding" community members who became addicted to prescription pain meds creates an "innocent victim" narrative about drug use. This ends up stigmatizing other people who use drugs, who are seen as culpable and blameworthy by contrast. While the prescription-to-street drug story is true and widespread, it inadvertently adds a layer of judgment to others affected by addiction.

Rollo Romig: Are there principles or key lessons you've learned about framing issues that apply broadly?

Julie Sweetland: One key lesson is to avoid crisis framing. Instead, emphasize solutions. Crisis framing can make people feel overwhelmed, leading to apathy when they feel the problem is too big to handle. Showing that solutions are possible helps engage people more constructively.

Another principle is to avoid vulnerability framing, which paints people as helpless victims. This can unintentionally imply that only some are deserving of help or lead to punitive attitudes toward the people seen as responsible for protecting the so-called vulnerable group. Instead, we should honor people's dignity and agency, showing them as active participants rather than passive recipients.

A third general lesson is that data alone rarely drives change. Rather than relying on stark statistics, it's more effective to embed data in narratives that help people understand how a problem works and why it matters.

Finally, we emphasize thematic over episodic stories. Instead of focusing on isolated incidents, thematic stories reveal trends, root causes, and social impacts, helping people see the bigger picture and understand their stake in the issue. This approach encourages support for systemic solutions rather than just addressing individual cases.

Rollo Romig: Is there an example that illustrates the impact of your work?

Julie Sweetland: One example we are well-known for is our influence on the narrative around early childhood development. This strategy, used globally over decades, has fundamentally shifted the conversation on early childhood in the U.S. It's a clear example of our impact because we've worked closely with major voices in this field, and we've seen real results—policy changes, shifts in public opinion, and institutional adaptations.

A specific impact is the metaphor of "toxic stress," which we developed to explain how adversity affects a developing brain and body. This phrase has been widely adopted and cited in the media, and we've observed public understanding evolving. For example, in national surveys by our partner Zero to Three, we've seen a rise in parents understanding that infants can feel and be affected by emotions like sadness or fear from birth. We also see this work influencing policy. For instance, the science of toxic stress was cited in a 2018 federal injunction to halt family separations at the U.S. border, with terms like "brain architecture" and "toxic stress" appearing in the legal language. Our research has fueled a movement that's effectively changing public mindsets and supporting policies to improve outcomes for children.

Rollo Romig: What are the biggest challenges you're currently facing in getting your work done, aside from funding?

Julie Sweetland: One of the biggest challenges across the sector is the need for narrative infrastructure. There's a growing recognition of the importance of narrative shift—changing the overarching narrative that shapes countless stories. However, there isn't yet the infrastructure—networks, partnerships, systems, and resources—to support narrative change at the scale needed for lasting impact.

While some issues have this infrastructure in place, many don't. Addressing this requires more than funding; it's a shift in mindset. Collective, long-term work is essential, but that's a challenge for nonprofits used to working on short, specific, deliverable-focused projects. Moving toward extended collaboration and a longer time horizon is a big adjustment and one of the sector's main challenges right now.

Rollo Romig: Is it that some issues have easier narratives, or is it more about building the narrative infrastructure to support them?

Julie Sweetland: Some issues definitely face more resistance than others. Certain topics are hotly contested and have organized opposition, which can add challenges. But I wouldn't say

there are issues we can't find effective frames for—each one just has its own level of difficulty. For instance, immigration and tobacco control face significant friction.

Tobacco control, in particular, has excellent narrative infrastructure, with plenty of data, a powerful story, strong relationships, and relatively robust funding compared to other public health issues. Yet, they're up against a very powerful, well-funded opposition, which makes progress challenging. On the other hand, issues like early childhood development don't face the same active opposition. While there's cultural inertia and general reluctance to invest in social programs, no one is openly against helping children, so the narrative vulnerability is lower. Issues like immigration, tobacco, and vaccination have steeper narrative hills to climb due to stronger opposition.

Rollo Romig: Specifically with childhood sexual abuse, while no one is pro-abuse, there are narrative challenges, especially with societal taboos. What have you found effective in framing this issue, and what challenges have you encountered?

Julie Sweetland: Our research on this is really interesting. Unsurprisingly, people find the topic of childhood sexual abuse horrifying and hard to talk about, often defaulting to simplistic, individualistic narratives shaped by media, like "Law and Order: SVU," which focus on depraved perpetrators and irreparably harmed victims.

Just labeling it a public health issue isn't enough; a compelling, prevention story is needed. In our tests, we found that most people don't realize prevention is possible; they usually only think in terms of catching and punishing perpetrators after abuse. Our research indicates that framing childhood sexual abuse as preventable, with real narratives of intervention, significantly impacts public perception.

However, our work has shown that people's perceptions can shift. The most effective narrative we tested is called the "help provided " narrative, which centers on individuals who experience unwanted sexual attraction to minors but are committed to not acting on it. This story portrays them as complex people with different identities who seek help, through either specific programs or general mental health support, to manage these feelings and prevent harm. The narrative arc focuses on self-recognition, seeking help, and preventing abuse before it happens.

I'll confess that initially, I felt discomfort with this story, but the evidence of its impact is strong. This approach shows that we can, in fact, communicate to the public that prevention can reduce

child sexual abuse to zero. Breaking the “spiral of silence” and enabling the public to discuss the issue productively would be a significant win.

This research is new, and so it’s too soon to see its impact. Researchers are leading this new narrative, and advocacy groups may adopt it as it gains traction. We’re partnering with Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and the Moore Center for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse, funded by NIH.. I believe this narrative shift will take root through the work of dedicated organizations already engaged on this issue.

Rollo Romig: You mentioned tracking impact through specific phrases you’ve coined, and how the truth needs to be repeated across various places to stick. Do you think finding a catchy, truthful phrase is key?

Julie Sweetland: Yes, a sticky phrase, something memorable and repeatable, can definitely help. We can use insights from social science to make messages even more memorable. Rhymes, alliteration, rhythm, or patterns, like “quantity versus quality” or “nature versus nurture,” create linguistic “handles” that make phrases easier to spread. But it’s essential not to overemphasize catchiness; catchy phrases are helpful, but they need a well-framed narrative to support them.A a simple, clear, and repeated message is usually sufficient.

Rollo Romig: It’s always helpful to hear about approaches that didn’t work as expected. Can you think of an example where something didn’t turn out as planned but taught you a lesson about framing?

Julie Sweetland: Our approach relies heavily on hypothesis testing. For instance, on child sexual abuse, we tested several narratives before settling on one. We tried a public health frame, but it didn’t resonate—people don’t always understand public health. We also tried narratives that focused on promoting healthy sexual development in kids, like teaching boundaries, but that didn’t connect either. The main takeaway is to “know before you go.” Testing is essential to find evidence of what actually works. We’ve found far more things that don’t work than those that do! We like to find out “in the lab” that something doesn’t work – it’s much better than seeing advocates pour energy into an untested frame that flops. A key lesson is not to assume you are your audience; it’s crucial to test and adjust based on real feedback.

Rollo Romig: Your work relies heavily on partnerships with various organizations you advise. What lessons have you learned about initiating and cultivating these relationships?

Julie Sweetland: We often start working with organizations when they recognize they have a narrative problem or need better framing. Having a leading organization to "set the table" and ensure that the field comes along with a new frame is key. From there, it's essential to focus on the mission—remembering that ultimate outcomes matter more than credit. Time is also an important ingredient in reframing. Our most successful partnerships have developed over five, ten, even fifteen years. These long-term relationships allow us to address issues more deeply and effectively, which is how sustainable framing shifts occur.

Rollo Romig: Looking ahead, what do you see as the most impactful factors for advancing children's well-being in the coming years?

Julie Sweetland: I'm encouraged by the growing intersection of children's issues with belonging and inclusion, particularly around racial justice, LGBTQ+ inclusion, and immigrant families. There's an increased focus within the children's movement on creating systems that support those furthest from opportunity, which is promising. Another crucial area is the intersection of the climate and children's movements. Children will disproportionately face climate impacts, so it's essential to consider them in resiliency planning—from equipping childcare centers with sufficient air conditioning to incorporating families with young children in broader evacuation plans. If we get this right, it could vastly improve outcomes for children; if we don't, the risks are substantial.

I think an impactful shift involves reorienting child welfare systems toward child well-being systems. This includes rethinking practices like mandated reporting and devoting energy instead to increasing investment in primary prevention to promote child and family well-being. Strengthening families and institutions around children can reduce risk factors for sexual violence.

Rollo Romig: Thank you so much for this really fascinating conversation.

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***This conversation has been edited and condensed.*