

Policy Analysis in Journalism: How to Use the Policy Memo Framework in Television News Reporting

By Nora Neus, M.P.P.

Joy Twisdale was nervous. She wasn't so sure about me.

We were sitting in her son Thomas's addiction counselor's office at the Valley Community Services Board in Staunton, Virginia—an office she had not seen much since Thomas died in a single car accident in the middle of the night, when police believe he was going to buy drugs. My photographer quietly set up the gear, and I tried to make her feel comfortable. It had taken about a month of phone calls and weeks of waiting for her to decide to come to the interview.

"I'm doing this for Thomas," she said suddenly, with a slight smile.

"What would he think of all this?" I asked, gesturing at the massive television camera, the lights blinding her, the microphone we threaded up her shirt.

She laughed then, breaking into a wide smile for the first time.

"He'd be like, 'alright mom!'" She flashed two big thumbs up.

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Before I started working as a journalist, I thought I would be a policy analyst for the federal government. I received my Master of Public Policy degree from the University of Virginia after spending two years writing policy memos analyzing the depth of current policy problems and proposing a multitude of solutions. When my career veered into local news, I put my wonky interests on hold.

But almost a year into my position as an on-air reporter at WVIR NBC29, I started hearing more and more about the nationwide opioid addiction epidemic. During the summer of 2016, media attention to the topic in national outlets grew. On the local level, we were also seeing more opioid and heroin overdose deaths in Central Virginia (see sources).

Working weekend nights does not help your social life, but it does put you at the front of the crime beat, where you can meet helpful sources. That July and August, I started calling my contacts at local rescue squads and police departments to get an idea of what they were seeing. From these men and women, I learned that, while we had not heard much about opioid addiction in our Central Virginia community, it was very much the topic of conversation behind closed doors at the fire station, hospital emergency department, and school counselors' offices.

I spent the next three months interviewing first responders, medical professionals and researchers, police officers, and addiction counselors. It was one of those counselors, Andrea Kendall, who suggested I speak to Joy Twisdale.

Sitting in Kendall's office under the glare of LED lights, Twisdale recounted how Thomas' normal childhood of basketball and video games in a small town called Stuarts Draft in the Shenandoah Valley turned into an adolescence of sneaking drugs and getting high.

"The whole time he was doing, he, he'd say, 'Mom, I don't know why I can't stop,' and he was very emotional," Twisdale told me once we started the interview, looking at her hands in her lap. "I took parenting classes for difficult children, and I was *trying* to help him." That help came in many forms. Friends like

Debbie Healey, who patiently sat next to Twisdale during her 45-minute interview, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder at points, supported the family—and especially Joy—while Thomas was using. Thomas started seeing addiction counselor Andrea Kendall as part of a court-ordered arrangement after he became addicted to opioids and then progressed to harder drugs and intravenous use.

Kendall was more at ease under the glare of the TV lights, but clearly she was attached to this family and its story. Thomas was “very intelligent, very bright, articulate,” she said, swiveling back and forth on her desk chair, “and I admit that even I did not realize the extent of his drug use at first.” In counseling, Thomas made it seem as though he took opioids every so often, and seldom harder drugs. But over time, he let that veil fall and began to be honest with Kendall, who was able to share these details of confidential sessions with the permission of Joy Twisdale. Kendall told me how Thomas would admit he woke up with only one goal: to get as high as possible. He told her he would think, “I just want to be numb, I don’t want to think, I don’t want to function.”

After a stint in an adolescent-focused in-patient rehab center in Northern Virginia, Thomas was living back at home in April 2015. One night, Thomas snuck out of the home at 2 a.m., in a car he wasn’t allowed to drive, to buy drugs. Police say he died on impact when he was thrown from the vehicle. Officers knocked on Joy’s door around 4 a.m.

“They said, ‘Your son was in a single car accident, and he didn’t make it.’ And I just... my body turned to jelly, and I just collapsed to the floor, and just started crying, ‘not my baby, please God, not my baby.’”

Thomas Twisdale may have been the center of my story, but I knew he was not the only Central Virginian addicted to opioids who progressed to other drugs and died as an indirect result of drug use, if not a direct overdose death. I needed to use his story as a starting point to showcase the depth of the problem across the region. After spending two years in graduate school hammering out policy memo after policy memo, the format came naturally to me: background, scope of the problem, options, and recommendation.

A typical television news story, called a “package” in broadcast parlance, is between a minute and twenty seconds and two minutes. For a longer investigative story like this, my producers told me I had time up to a few minutes, but I knew I would have to tell the story in two parts to make room for the details I knew were important. It seemed natural to focus the first part on the scope of the problem and the second on potential solutions from experts in the community.

Part one of my report told the Twisdale family story and provided context within the larger epidemic. I used statistics from the Department of Health and Human Services to show that in 2014, the last year with reliable data, more than 1,700 young adults died from prescription death overdoses, a four-fold increase since 1999 (HHS, 2014). I interviewed first responders and healthcare providers in the region, one of whom told me, in no uncertain terms, “In this region, this is an epidemic. This is the real deal” (Joyce, 2017). Part two, subtitled “What We Can Do,” highlighted three solutions from three stakeholder groups: reduce (health care providers can prescribe fewer legal opioids to reduce amount in circulation), dispose (community members and family can clean out medicine cabinets), and treat (the criminal justice system can prioritize treating drug abusers instead of, or in addition to, incarcerating them).

My final story, “Drugs in Virginia: Opioid Addiction,” aired on December 8 and 9, 2016. That night, a producer who had not worked on the story pulled me aside, impressed, and said, “That was such an innovative way of structuring the report.” I laughed and offhandedly said, “No, I promise it wasn’t, it was just a policy memo turned into television.” But in that moment, I realized he was completely right; I had just presented what was essentially a policy memo in a local news format. As if by muscle memory, in order to present a complicated policy topic to a relatively uninformed set of viewers, my instincts went to the tried and true policy memo framework.

Policy makers in the community responded quickly to the story. Albemarle County Commonwealth's Attorney Robert Tracci called me the day after the story aired to announce that he was starting a taskforce with area health providers to target the epidemic, based on my reporting. In an open letter to the administrators of the University of Virginia Health System and Sentara Martha Jefferson Hospital, he wrote that our NBC29 investigation "cast additional light on the scope and prevalence of this epidemic in Central Virginia" (Tracci, 2016).

While I did not set out to structure this report as a policy memo, a format seldom—if ever—used for local television news packages, the format worked perfectly to accomplish my goal: to highlight a "hidden" problem in the community that we, in the local media, had not dug into yet, and spur actual change in the real world.

In policy school, I worried my curriculum and policy analysis skill development would only apply to my future career if I decided to pursue a bureaucratic job. Through reporting this story, I discovered the skills of policy analysis can—and should—be applied to fields beyond in-house government policy analysis to add substance and grit to news reports at all levels, local and beyond.

Nora Neus is an on-air reporter for WVIR NBC29 in Charlottesville, Virginia, covering primarily local government and public policy. She holds a Master of Public Policy degree from the Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy and is currently working toward an M.A. in War Studies through the distance learning program at King's College London.

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