5.8: Re-defining the Issue

It is one thing to argue about an issue but another to agree on what the issue is. For example, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the first U.S. government report on smoking, the Surgeon General said that cigarette smoking was responsible for more than one out of every six deaths in the United States. Noting that nearly 30 percent of American adults still smoke, despite the Government's warnings, the Surgeon General said that many publications that carry cigarette advertisements also refuse to run articles on the danger of smoking. In addition, the Surgeon General defended taxes on cigarettes. The issue, said the Surgeon General, is health. Not so, said the cigarette companies; the issue is individual freedom—whether our society should have more or less government interference in private enterprise. The issue is whether the government should be involved, by taxation and by requiring warnings on cigarette packs, in an unconstitutional attempt at censorship. It's time for more people, including the Surgeon General, to wake up to the fact that "smokers and the tobacco industry are productive forces in the economy," said the director of media relations for the Tobacco Institute, which is the lobbying organization for the industry.¹
Notice that both parties in this argument are trying to redefine the issue or "frame the issue" for their own benefit. In this scenario it is probably a mistake to say that one party has identified the right issue and the other has not. All these issues should be addressed. Bringing them all out into the open gives the public a better appreciation of the situation and the ability to make more informed choices.

Suppose Otis has been trying to convince his sister that doctors and nurses working in federally funded family counseling centers should not be allowed to tell pregnant women about the option of getting an abortion. His reasons are that abortion is immoral and that the federal government should not be in the business of promoting immorality. Suppose Otis's sister reacts to his argument by saying that nurses and doctors should be able to give any medical advice they believe to be in the best interests of their patients, so the federal government should not be interfering in the doctor-patient or nurse-patient relationship by outlawing counseling about abortion. This argument will miss its target because it does not address Otis's point about the morality of abortion. Their dialogue will be especially frustrating for both of them until they realize that they are talking about different issues.

Progress can also be made in some disagreements by focusing on the issue in other ways: by defining the issue more precisely, by narrowing the issue, and by noticing when one issue must be settled before another can be fully addressed. For an example of the dependence of issues, consider the lobbyist for San Francisco who is deciding whether the city should take a position to support or oppose a proposed state law to redefine the formula for distributing state monies to county hospitals. The lobbyist will probably not be able to decide whether to recommend support for or opposition to the bill until another issue is settled—whether the bill will give more or less money to San Francisco County Hospital. Local governments usually don't take a stand for or against a bill based solely on fiscal impact, but they always keep fiscal impact in mind.

Here is an example of progress by narrowing the issue. Suppose a student in a government or political science class is asked to write a four-page essay on a topic of their own choosing. Choosing the issue of whether capitalism is better than communism would be inadvisable because this issue is so large and the essay is supposed to be so short. That big issue would not be manageable. The essay would have to discuss every country in the world and its economics, political freedom, military, lifestyles, and so forth. The essay would be improved if the student narrowed the issue to, let us say, whether race relations were better under American capitalism or under Soviet communism during World War II.
Exercise (PageIndex{1})

State the issue in the following letter to the editor. Then sketch the argument for the other side of the issue—that is, the side that the letter writer is opposed to.

Regarding "Driver Dies after Chase on 1-5," Oct. 28: The article seemed to be really confused. It stated, "The death was the fifth this year in the Sacramento area resulting from high-speed police chases." In fact, it resulted, as most if not all of them do, from some low-life scumbag fleeing officers attempting to apprehend him—in this case for auto theft.

What would you suggest officers do, wave good-bye as soon as someone's speed exceeds the limit? Or would you prefer that police just never arrest anyone who travels at high speeds? I'm sure suspects would like that, but I'm also sure decent, law-abiding citizens wouldn't.