Changing The Public Conversation About Social Problems: Framing Effective Messages

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Questions we want you to answer

- What is the problem?
- What are the solutions?
- Who is responsible?
We can solve the climate crisis.

We can replace America with 100% clean electricity within 15 years. Doing so will deliver the affordability, reliability and confidence our economy needs, as well as help solve the climate crisis. All it takes is the political will to support national policies that...

- Get the most out of the energy we currently produce
- Rapidly deploy the clean energy technologies we already know work
- Create a new smart, integrated grid to deliver power economically from wherever it is generated to wherever people live.

Dive deeper below.

Clean Energy Economy

action alerts

- Tell AT&T to All Our Ad
- Write a Letter to the Editor—Impower America with green jobs now!
- Tell Congress to End Our Addiction to fossil Fuels
- Make Your Power Company Carbon-Neutral
- Take Action to Impower Americans
- We Can’t Afford to Wait for a Clean Energy Economy

solutions

- Clean Energy Economy
- Personal Choices
- Adoption of Renewables
- Enhanced Energy Efficiency
- Innovative Leadership

View all solutions →

Video/Audio Clips

Select Year:

02-01-08
Invisible_Poor
Invisible_Poor

04-03-08
Serve_Give
Serve_Give

04-23-08
The Little Feet
The Little Feet

04-03-08

02-01-08

04-03-08

04-23-08

04-03-08

02-01-08

04-03-08

04-23-08

04-03-08
Rethinking Communications:  
*How do you measure communications success?*

✓ Creativity of Campaign Slogan  
✓ Quantity of news coverage  
✓ *Post-release Website Hits; report downloads*  
  ➡ Ability of message to move support for policy?

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Rethinking Communications:  
*What is it good for?*

★ Effective storytelling can move people toward supporting policies that advance social good  
★ What do you need to know to do that well?
Core FrameWorks Principles

- Social issues advocates need to understand that they are framers of social problems
- There is a **science** of cognition - how people think and process information - which informs the framing of social issues
- There should be a **science** to communications on social issues

Our Perspective:
To change the lens, we have to understand how people process information

- The mind is a **swamp of hypotheses** based on prior knowledge, experience and expectation
- These “**schema**”, are activated when confronted with new information
- We make inferences about specific cases using these more abstracted, **general** categories
- Schema often persist even in the face of evidence to the contrary. **WHY?**
Henry is a short, slim man. He likes to read poetry. He has been active in environmental and feminist causes. Henry is a(n) _________________.

MOST PROBABLE _____ _____ _____ LEAST PROBABLE

A. TRUCK DRIVER
B. IVY LEAGUE CLASSICS PROFESSOR
C. A TRUCK DRIVER WHO IS A MEMBER OF THE AUDUBON SOCIETY AND MENSA

Schema function as navigation devices....

• People “actively filter, sort, and reorganize information in personally meaningful ways in constructing an understanding of public issues.”

• How the media frames an issue influences which schema are more or less accessible to individuals when evaluating social problems.
Why Is This Important?

- Frames cue schema
- Subtle variations in values, messenger, metaphor, image, signal to people how to think about an issue
- The extent to which people have an opportunity for “mental rehearsal” of a frame determines which are weak or strong (which will become the default frame on an issue)

What Is A Frame?

Frames are in our materials:
- The central organizing principle in any communication that structures meaning
- A composition of elements --- visuals, values, stereotypes, messengers --- which, together, trigger the conceptual categories/schema/cultural models that people use to make sense of the world
Any one of these elements can **Trigger** our existing schema

- values
- context
- metaphors
- numbers
- visuals
- tone
- messengers

Each of these signals:
- What this is **ABOUT**?
- What is the Problem?
- What are the Solutions?
- Who is Responsible?

I know this story! It's about X

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```
politicians/
elected
officials
```

```
infrastructure
for all
```

```
bureaucracy
```

```
regulator
```

```
taxes,
spending
```

```
crutch for
some
```

“government” schema
Government frames in the news....

What comes to mind when I ask you to think about Government?

Bureaucratic  Greedy  Necessary Evil
Corrupt
Wasteful  IRRELEVANT
Political  Out for themselves
64% feel disconnected

What schema/cultural models are they employing when considering this question?

“Most people don’t think about most social issues most of the time.”
Nelson Polsby and Aaron Wildavsky

Further...

People get most information about social affairs from the news media...which contributes to those “easily activated schema” or dominant frames
The Pictures In Our Heads: The Stories On Our Local Screens

Topics:

- crime/accidents
- human interest/pop culture/entertainment
- govt/elections
- other: includes business, domestic issues, science, foreign relations, defense/military

Between a rock and a hard place. Martha R. Ferrante, of Easthampton, knows that's her real address.
Proposition:

- Persuasive communications cannot depend on simply putting information in front of people
- Making news is not the (only) goal
- Issue awareness is not the (only) goal
- Why??
Why doesn’t more of the Public take responsibility for social change?

- It’s a cognitive failure – they don’t understand what their responsibility could be....
- Which is a communications failure - we haven’t successfully shown them what their responsibility could be

Communications Approaches:
consumer v civic perspectives

Advocating for sobriety checkpoints; the passage of administrative license revocation (ALR) which provides swift punishment for drunk drivers while making the roadways safer for other motorists; reauthorization of anti-drunk driving provisions in the nation’s highway bill.
Communications Approaches: consumer v civic perspectives

- Focus on individual behavior change – public relations, public service advertising, social marketing

- Focus on civic engagement – grassroots mobilization, policy campaigns, media advocacy, strategic frame analysis™
Our Perspective

• You have to know
  • what’s in people’s heads on the issue
  • where the trip wires are in their patterns of thinking, and
  • what trumps and redirects those patterns

First Step? Investigate the swamp of public opinion

1. What is the take away from public opinion research on the issue?
   *meta-analyses of existing public opinion research*

2. What are the dominant frames in public discourse?
   *media content analyses; content analyses of advocates’ and experts’ materials*

3. How does the public think about the issue; what is “easy to think”, what are they missing, what triggers the default or dominant frames?
   *cognitive interviews, focus groups*
Second Step? Determine how to Navigate the Swamp

4. Distill/Explain Expert Knowledge so it resonates with us normal folk
   "Simplifying Models" research

5. When we tell new stories based on findings from earlier research, can the public see what’s public? and understand expert knowledge on the issue?
   Focus groups

6. Can we show that our new stories significantly improve attitudes and support for policy?
   National experimental/priming surveys

End Result: Empirically vetted Reframes

- A reframe is ready for “prime-time” when it has been rigorously tested through a series of qualitative and quantitative methods from the cognitive and social sciences.
- We hold our reframes accountable to demonstrable shifts in policy preferences.
- A reframe is recommended only when the results are robust.
Improve your Communications Today!

• Lesson #1: Order matters: Prime your communications with vision, not data - and not the dominant frame!

• Lesson #2: Context matters: Tell Thematic/Systems stories, not Episodic/Vivid personal Stories

• Lesson #3 - Messengers Matter: Look for those with expertise but no vested interest

Order Matters: Lead with Values

Order matters. Rebutting is NOT reframing. Once a frame is established, it will dominate the conversation and crowd out subsequent frames. You shouldn't repeat a bad frame or wait to kill it off. Don't lodge your reframe in the last paragraph.
Flu Vaccine
Facts &
Myths

Influenza (flu) is a serious disease of the nose, throat, and lungs, and it can lead to pneumonia. Each year about 200,000 people in the U.S. are hospitalized and about 36,000 people die because of the flu. Most who die are 65 years and older. But small children less than 2 years old are as likely as those over 65 to have to go to the hospital because of the flu.

The flu shot cannot cause the flu. Some people get a little soreness or redness where they get the shot. It goes away in a day or two. Serious problems from the flu shot are very rare.

The side effects are worse than the flu.

The worst side effect you’re likely to get from a shot is a sore arm. The nasal mist flu vaccine might cause nasal congestion, runny nose, sore throat and cough. The risk of a severe allergic reaction is less than 1 in 4 million.

Adults and children with conditions like asthma, diabetes, heart disease, and kidney disease need to

"Myth and Fact" Doesn’t Work

• Denials inherently require repeating the bad information, which may be one reason they can paradoxically reinforce it.

• Rather than deny a false claim, it is better to make a completely new assertion that makes no reference to the original myth.

“Myth and Fact” Doesn’t Work

- Many people misremembered false statements about the flu in the CDC brochure as true.
- Older people misremembered 28% of the false statements as true; 3 days later, they misremembered 40% of the false statements as true.
- Younger people did better at first, but three days later made as many errors as older people did after 30 minutes.
- Subjects attributed the source of their false beliefs to the CDC.


Values and Public opinion

- Citizens do not normally deduce issue opinions from a stable political ideology of the liberal-conservative type.
- For most citizens, social and political values fill the ideological gap.

What are the challenges in the translation process from abstract value to concrete social policy opinion?

1. **People hold conflicting values (e.g., individual success and social justice)**

2. **Many social issues foster value conflict by supporting certain values at the expense of others (power and control at the expense of civil liberties, e.g.)**

3. **Many scholars see value conflict as the REASON for the lack of ideological cohesion in political attitudes**
How can effective values frames improve our communications about social problems?

Case Study: Community Health

The Framing Challenge

You want them to consider:

SOCIAL DETERMINANTS
- Systems thinking
- Conditions
- Built environment
- Societal norms/policies
- Quality of life

But they can’t stop thinking about...

HEALTH INDIVIDUALISM
- Consumer thinking
- Choices
- Nature (abounds)
- Mindset
- Lifestyle
What’s Missing?

• Public health as a common good or infrastructure

• Roles for government, community and industry in advancing and protecting public health.

• Public health as shaped by material forces (availability of foods, public transportation, “engineered” problems from zoning and design) as opposed to

4 Values Reframes Developed and Tested

✓ Interdependence
✓ Ingenuity
✓ Prevention
✓ Fairness

Not your grandmother’s advocacy

• About place, not people or groups

• About our society as a whole before they are about specific groups

• About broader goal of inclusion and improvement

• Explicitly connect goal to environmental conditions, access to nutritious foods, etc.
Example of Values frame:

Interdependence

Public policies often ignore the fact that what affects Americans in one part of the nation affects us all and that we will only succeed when all parts of the nation are in good shape. When we build communities where people can't breathe healthy air, exercise safely and conveniently, and get nutritious foods, these areas cannot contribute as they might to the nation's overall prosperity and the nation's progress is held back. As a result, we are unable to improve school test scores, physical fitness and workforce participation.

The Good News

★ All 4 values frames increased support for all policies tested.
★ Policies included improving school nutrition and exercise policies, public transportation, parks and recreation, zoning and livability, availability of fresh and local foods, etc.
Context Matters: Tell Thematic/Systems Stories

What’s An Effective Story for Social Change?

FROM:
- Portrait
- People
- Vivid Anecdote
- Entertaining
- Spectator

TO:
- Landscape
- Systems/relationships
- Compelling Evidence
- Engaging
- Enabler/participant
### Shanto Iyengar on Media Frames

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EPISODIC</th>
<th>THEMATIC</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• About Individuals</td>
<td>✓ About Issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Events-oriented</td>
<td>✓ Trends-oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Issues are personal</td>
<td>✓ Issues are public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Appeal to consumer</td>
<td>✓ Appeal to citizen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Solution? Better information</td>
<td>✓ Solution? Better policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Fix the person</td>
<td>✓ Fix the condition</td>
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### Iyengar: Media Effects of Vivid Personal Stories

- When poverty was described in societal terms - *economic conditions, trends in unemployment, etc.* - people assigned responsibility to societal factors – failed government programs, the political climate, economic conditions.

- When poverty dwelled on particular instances of poor people, viewers held the poor causally responsible.
Conclusion?

"Human despair and devastation, poignantly depicted, (do) not generally add to viewers’ sense of national priorities."

"...News stories that direct viewers’ attention to the flesh and blood victims of national problems prove no more persuasive than news stories that cover national problems impersonally - indeed, they tend to be less persuasive. This undermining of agenda-setting may be particularly powerful when viewers in effect blame the victims for the problems that have befallen them."

Shanto Iyengar, p. 38, 42 News that Matters

Framing Lesson #3: Messengers Matter

County Sheriff speaking on proposed cuts to mental health services

AARP President Speaking on K-12 budget

MAINE CAN DO BETTER
Investing in Maine’s future together.
Effects of Messengers on Global Warming Policy Support

- Framing a message about Global Warming by using an Environmentalist messenger delivering a Crisis message undermines support for policies that address Global Warming (-11 point from control)

- Framing a message about Global Warming by using a Citizen messenger delivering a Legacy/Stewardship message increases support for policies that address Global Warming (+14 point from control)

Exercise: What’s Wrong with these Framing Recommendations?

Again, consider:
What’s the problem?
What’s the solution?
Who is responsible?
POLL FINDING:

BIG GOVERNMENT:

Voters worry about a big government bureaucracy attached to health care reform.

The Advice:

Remind voters of the bureaucrats from the insurance companies who are currently standing between them and their doctors. It also helps to talk about having leaders set standards that hold the insurance companies accountable.
Analyze this:

Suggested frame:

If you want to see what bureaucracy and red tape look like, try reaching a person on the phone the next time you call your own insurance company, and try getting them to explain why they won’t pay $800 of some medical treatment your doctor ordered. We need leaders willing to take on the insurance companies, by setting clear, high standards for what’s covered, preventing them from requiring patients to jump through hoops just to get insured, and saving billions by cutting administrative costs and moving to electronic medical records. We need leaders who will hold insurance companies accountable, guaranteeing us all more choices, better care, and no more of those 45-minute phone-calls. And if we stopped wasting doctors’ time with paperwork so they had more time for patients, and stopped forcing people who used to have insurance into emergency rooms for basic care, we wouldn’t have to worry about overloading our system.