

Communications for Social Good

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April 2004

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Practice Matters: The Improving Philanthropy Project is supported by the California Endowment and the Robert Wood Johnson, Ewing Marion Kauffman, John S. and James L. Knight, and David and Lucile Packard Foundations. The project is housed at the OMG Center for Collaborative Learning in Philadelphia. Patricia Patrizi, Principal, Patrizi Associates, directs the project. Abby Spector serves as project manager and Kay Sherwood is the principal manuscript editor.

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ISSN 1545-6781

Editors' Note

The role of communications is rising in importance in grantmaking approaches, and no longer is restricted simply to telling the story of grant-funded programs after they have ended. The Benton Foundation, the Partnership for a Drug Free America, and other organizations are demonstrating that communications can be a powerful tool to address widespread social problems. Most grantmakers, however, are unschooled in communications thinking and practices.

In their paper, "Communications for Social Good," Susan Nall Bales and Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr. introduce the latest perspectives from communication theory and practice to help grantmakers promote more effective communication strategies among their grantees and within their own organizations. In a clear, approachable style, the authors guide readers through decisions about the major aspects of communications campaigns. They conclude with a call for greater collaboration among the philanthropic, academic, and policy communities to study and improve approaches to communications in the public interest.

Executive Summary

If foundations are more intentional in using communications as a tool for social change, and if they incorporate what is known about how the media affect individuals and groups into their grantmaking, they will be much more likely to achieve the kind of long-term change in public understanding and opinion that is needed to maximize their impact. This paper presents the latest perspectives from communications theory and practice in order to update philanthropic thinking and help philanthropists judge effective communications practices among their grantees and within their own organizations.

Communications Thinking

In order to evaluate its utility to grantmaking, foundations must appreciate the role that communications plays in public thinking and public life. Prevailing theory in the field of communications posits close, but complicated, connections among these phenomena. Three core concepts can help clarify and focus foundation thinking. These concepts are: agenda-setting, framing, and persuasion. First, public opinion research over the past decade confirms that news media constitute the main source of Americans' information about public affairs. The real world is increasingly viewed through the lens of the news media. As issues rise and fall on the news media agenda, so does their potential for attracting the attention of the public and its policymakers. The ability of the news media to set the public agenda determines to a large extent what issues policymakers will feel compelled to address. Indeed, media are often read by policymakers as the proxy for public opinion. These findings elaborate the core communications concept of “agenda-setting.”

Second, news media do more than tell us what to think about; they also direct how we think about particular social issues—whether, for example, we consider them to be individual problems necessitating better behaviors or whether they are collective, social problems requiring structural policy and program solutions. Messages conveyed by mainstream media take on the value of public narratives about the ways of the world, and different types of stories produce different social learning. When news frames public issues narrowly, as problems of specific people or groups, support for policy proposals plummets. When a media story highlights conditions

and trends, by contrast, public support for policies to address the problem increases dramatically. Further, how the media frame or present public issues is critical to the final resolution of public problems. Not only can framing affect whether the solution to any given social problem is judged by the public to be individual or collective, but the media's use of a specific frame is an important influence on the way people judge the relevance and legitimacy of a communication's implicit or explicit call to action. This set of findings elaborates the communications concept called "framing."

Third, the news media influence how people think about attitudes and behaviors they need to adopt in order to enhance their own well-being or prevent individual loss—the communications concept called persuasion. Persuasion theorists focus on the responses of the target audience to messages which are largely seen as "pushed out" through media. For example, a persuasion campaign oriented to improving children's health might adopt a message like, "Oral health: it's not just about your teeth," building off the documented impression that one of the major personal obstacles to brushing is the erroneous belief that the health of the mouth does not influence overall health. Persuasive communications are particularly well-suited to the goal of changing individual behavior, even if the messages are broadcast to mass publics, rather than to social change goals that focus on the opportunities and constraints on individuals' behavior.

Communication Practices

Communications campaigns have traditionally been classified according to their end target or locus of change: the individual consumer or the mass public. Those aimed at the individual tend to draw their strategies and tools from a commercial perspective, using public relations, marketing, and advertising as the foundation for their campaigns. Publicly oriented campaigns tend to rely upon the theory and practice of politics as their foundation. The paper describes seven schools of communications practice that reflect these two orientations. The schools that target individual consumers, based on commercial perspectives and techniques, include: public relations, public service advertising, and social marketing. The schools that target collective publics, based on political perspectives and techniques, include: grassroots social mobilization, policy campaigns, media advocacy, and strategic frame analysis.

What foundations can learn from these different schools of practice is, above all, intentionality. Together, these different schools arrange and deploy different techniques, based on their understanding of the core concepts of agenda-setting, framing, and persuasion, and arrive at different conclusions about what matters in communications campaigning. For funders, an important lesson is that the variety exists, and that the different practices can be used critically to refine any communications campaign's theory of change, tools of analysis, operational strategy, products,

and evaluation design. The simple question “What kind of campaign do we need for this problem?” is an improvement over the imprecision that currently characterizes philanthropic communications. The comparisons offered in the paper set the stage for communications campaigns that can realize the promise of being truly “strategic.”

Communications Practice: Tools and Techniques

A wide array of specific tools and techniques can be enlisted to support different organizational objectives. The paper’s discussion of these is organized around Harold Lasswell’s enduring five-questions model of communications: “Who says what to whom via what channels with what effects?” as well as a sixth important question added by later researchers: Why? For each of the six questions, the authors present research that supports and explains its importance, followed by a series of leading questions to guide communications planners through decisions about each element of a communications campaign. For example, questions at the problem identification stage of planning a communications strategy—addressing the question of why communicate—include:

- What is the social problem we are addressing?
- What are its characteristics?
- What do people already know about it, and how do they think about it?
- What have been the dominant frames of media coverage of the issue?
- What do we think should be done to improve/solve it?
- What do experts believe should be done to improve/solve it?
- What is our policy agenda or what are our objectives in tackling this problem?
- What is our theory of change, e.g., how do we think our efforts can prove helpful?
- What objective indicators would suggest to us that opinion/policy/behavior is moving in the right direction?
- What is the appropriate role for communications in the broader strategy?
- What schools of communications practice seem best oriented to this problem?

Lessons

The rarity with which scholars, policy advocates, and foundation program officers are involved together in the practical business of devising better approaches to communications in the public interest is a costly oversight in the evolution of philanthropy. There are numerous ways in which this can be remedied. Foundations with common agendas can collaborate by studying changes in public discourse on these issues. More systematic planning and evaluation of campaigns would result in better comparisons and more real lessons learned. The systematic incorporation of a theoretical framework and research into funded activities would build better overall capacity among grantees which, in turn, would accrue value across entire fields. In any case, foundations can play an important convening role in communications thinking, as well as in insisting on well-planned communications campaigns that demonstrate an understanding of the way communications works, both theoretically and practically. We will know we have arrived at this juncture when foundation communications funding is devoted not merely to dissemination but equally to understanding the communications context in which social problems occur and persist. And we will know foundations understand the potential of “communications for social good” when communications funding is integrated robustly into all grants that seek to improve the social good.

Introduction

Why should foundations do communications? Because they can't not do it. Like it or not, communications is the way that nonprofit organizations, working through the media and grassroots organizations, seek to engage ordinary people in understanding and solving social problems. Foundations underestimate the power of communications to the detriment of their larger social goals. If foundations are in the business of promoting ideas that address social problems and partnering with communities to realize those ideals, then communications must become an integral part of their strategy.

While foundations have often shied away from communications, they have done so under the mistaken belief that communications is largely the handmaiden of fundraisers or publicity-seekers. Getting communications back into the social change equation is imperative if foundations are to play an active part in public life and public discourse. Research in the cognitive and social sciences during the last decade suggests that real social change involves changing the way people think about social problems and solutions. Communications can both help and hinder this important transformation. When communications is effective, people can see an issue from a different perspective. When communications is inadequate, people default to the “pictures in their heads”¹—stereotypes are reinforced, civic participation is suppressed, and hopelessness confirmed. Seen from this perspective, communications is part of the problem that grantmakers must address in overcoming obstacles to building a better world.

In this paper, we argue that if foundations are more intentional in using communications as a tool for social change, and if they incorporate what is known about how the media affect individuals and groups in their communications efforts, they will be much more likely to achieve the kind of long-term change in public understanding and opinion that now eludes their sponsored projects. By deconstructing the notion of strategic communications, which is our goal, we can more precisely attribute the mechanisms that move public will and, in the end, identify for philanthropy the vital elements of communications thinking for social good.

To this end, we present the latest in communications theorizing and practice in order to update philanthropic thinking. The integrated approach presented here rests on three core concepts that inform communications thinking—the theory—which are linked to two types of

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communications campaigning—the practice. Agenda-setting, the first concept, is oriented to the solution of public problems: People attempt to influence the public agenda in order to secure public funds or enact public policies. The second concept, framing, illuminates the way people process information and distinguishes what kinds of stories support public *versus* private attributions of responsibility for action. The third concept, persuasion, has its origins in private consumer choice theory, but has also been adapted to public problems, in the form of social marketing. The two types of communications campaigning are aimed, respectively, at individual and public change.

There are several different explanations among communications scholars and experts of the problems that communications must solve, and different approaches to solving them, which are reviewed in our attempt to unify theory and practice. We offer two different ways to deconstruct the practice of communications. The first, which we find the preferable approach, looks at different schools of thought in order to match these to a foundation's communications objectives. The second, and more common approach, deconstructs communications by the topical challenges raised in various aspects of campaign practice, from the choice of messengers to the target audience. In presenting these two options, we attempt to show how the theoretical literature can inform better communications choices. Overall, the question we aim to answer is: How can foundations help their grantees to do better communications to promote long-term public understanding and support of proven programs and policies? The answer to this question must begin with an understanding of communications thinking and its particular lens on the arena of social issues.

An understanding of communications thinking and practice is essential to help foundations and their grantees promote proven social programs and policies.

What Is Communications Thinking?

The history of public communication campaigns in America is also, integrally, a history of social change.

—William J. Paisley²

In order to evaluate its utility to grantmaking, foundations must appreciate the role that communications plays in public thinking and public life. This requires funders to understand the relationship of communications to the evolution of public issues. Even though some may question the relevance of communications to solving social problems, few would challenge the importance of public opinion in influencing which social problems are allotted attention and resources. Establishing the relationships among communications, public opinion, and action on social issues, then, is an important step in developing a philanthropic stance toward communications. Prevailing theory in the field of communications posits close, but complicated, connections among these three phenomena.³

Public Opinion and Communications Media

There is no such thing as a social problem, until enough people, with enough power in the society, agree that there is. Social problems are produced by public opinion, not by particular social conditions, undesirable or otherwise.

—Mauss and Wolfe⁴

How, then, does public opinion form around a social issue? “Most [people] are not interested in most public issues most of the time,” wrote Nelson Polsby and Aaron Wildavsky in a famous analysis of American public opinion.⁵ Most people have little daily contact with many issues on the public agenda—from AIDS to biological terrorism and school violence—yet many develop opinions about these issues and their opinions greatly influence policymaker priorities and behavior. Mass media abet this process of opinion formation.

Most Americans are exposed to a cacophony of communications. Whether in the form of music and the arts, entertainment, or the more

Prevailing theory posits close, but complicated, connections among communications, public opinion, and action on social issues.

recent trend toward Internet outlets, people learn about their world from an array of sources, and communications campaigns take advantage of these multiple sources of information. Public opinion research over the past decade, however, confirms that *news media* constitute the main source of Americans' information about public affairs.⁶ What this means is that the real world is increasingly viewed through the lens of the news media. Social learning about race, family, poverty, etc., can be demonstrated to be highly influenced by the stories told to the public on the nightly news. This is not to say that movies and entertainment television, for instance, play an insignificant role in the construction of the average person's worldview; but, the news media should be accorded a central place in any thoughtful formulation of the role of communications in promoting the social good. For purposes of this paper, we will concern ourselves primarily with news media, both print and broadcast, and to a lesser extent, public service media and issue advertising. We define communications campaigns in the broadest sense, as those intentional efforts that use earned and paid media, as well as other techniques, to advance a particular perspective on a social issue.

As issues rise and fall on the news media agenda, so does their potential for attracting the attention of the public and its policymakers. The ability of the news media to set the public agenda, in turn, determines to a large extent what issues policymakers will feel compelled to address. Indeed, media are often read by policymakers as the proxy for public opinion.⁷ Vincent Price expressed the relationship between the media and public opinion this way: "Public opinion—whether viewed in philosophical, political, sociological, or psychological terms—remains fundamentally a communication concept."⁸ This is important because too often public opinion is studied and addressed without reference to the way the culture's storytellers have framed public issues over time. Price would suggest that this is a fatal omission.

News media do more than tell us what to think about; they also direct how we think about particular social issues—whether, for example, we consider them to be individual problems necessitating better behaviors or whether they are collective, social problems requiring structural policy and program solutions.⁹ Messages conveyed by mainstream media take on the value of public narratives about the ways of the world, and different types of stories produce different social learning. Our own research confirms the findings from more than a decade of social science experiments: When news frames public issues narrowly, as problems of specific people or groups, support for policy proposals plummets. When a media story highlights conditions and trends, by contrast, public support for policies to address the problem increases dramatically. Michael Pertschuk reports that, as long as smoking was covered as a story about individual behavior choice, it was unlikely to galvanize a public following for more stringent tobacco control policies. Framed as a "defective product" that requires

Public opinion research confirms that *news media* constitute the main source of Americans' information about public affairs.

government intervention to protect the citizenry, however, tobacco control proposals gained supporters.¹⁰

How the media frame or present public issues is equally critical to the final resolution of public problems.¹¹ Not only can framing affect whether the solution to any given social problem is judged by the public to be individual or collective, but the media's use of specific frames is an important influence on the way people judge the relevance and legitimacy of a communication's implicit or explicit call to action. For example, if child abuse is portrayed as a criminal act perpetrated by evildoers, calls to action that ask people to befriend troubled parents before they become abusers, or even to support preventive treatment for stressed parents, are unlikely to meet with a positive public response. Thus, the concept of framing is important both to those campaigns that seek to move public opinion and to those that seek to change individual behavior.

While many communications campaigns address the "public," they usually do so as an aggregate of individuals, not in the collective sense of seeking what is best for the society. Such campaigns seek to persuade individuals to change their beliefs, feelings, or behaviors, based on research about how individuals are affected by specific messages. In this sense, most communications campaigns pay more attention to the psychological orientation of the individual as a consumer who chooses between competing products than they do to the sociological or political roles people play in voting and expressing policy preferences about social issues. For example, this typical definition of public communications campaigns is oriented toward an individual unit of analysis:

Public education campaigns . . . [attempt] to inform, persuade, or motivate behavior changes in a relatively well-defined and large audience, generally for noncommercial benefits to the individuals and/or society at large, typically within a given time period, by means of organized communication activities involving mass media and often complemented by interpersonal support.¹²

Some communications scholars have argued that this overemphasis on individual behavior dooms communications campaigns from the beginning. As Larry Wallack has written, "a key factor in determining the effectiveness of communications designed to achieve social good (is) whether the individual is the most appropriate or most effective agent to achieve social change."¹³

Three Core Communications Concepts

What we know about how news media influence public opinion can be summed up in terms of three core communications concepts:

Framing affects whether the solution to a given social problem is judged by the public to be individual or collective.

- **Agenda-setting:** The media influence which issues people think are important for government to address.
- **Framing:** The media influence how people think about and interpret ideas and issues, particularly how they think about solutions to problems.
- **Persuasion:** The media influence how people think about attitudes and behaviors they need to adopt in order to enhance their own well-being or prevent individual loss.

In order for foundations and their grantees to develop effective communications plans, they must be able to relate their challenges and their strategies to these core concepts.

Agenda-setting

Agenda-setting is the name given to the process of placing issues on the policy agenda for public consideration and intervention. News media are instrumental to the perceived salience of a particular social problem. Indeed, researchers view the policy agenda as the outcome of media influence on the public.¹⁴ As another communications scholar sees it, the media set the public agenda which, in turn, sets the policymaker agenda.¹⁵

Experimental research over the last decade has demonstrated that even brief exposure to media coverage of a particular issue will increase public assessment of that issue's importance.¹⁶ Thus, an issue is *by definition* "a social problem that has received mass media coverage"¹⁷ and the agenda-setting process is defined as "an ongoing competition among issue proponents to gain the attention of media professionals, the public, and policy elites."¹⁸

The implications of these relationships are profound. News media have the ability to place a high priority on issues that may, in fact, not be as important as others. Conversely, those issues that get relatively little media attention are unlikely to figure among the most important problems facing the nation. This essentially casts news media in the role of democracy's unelected gatekeepers. If a social problem does not conform to the needs and conventions of journalism, it is unlikely to get told and sold to the American public.

For example, in decrying "parachute journalism"—the media's tendency to move rapidly from crisis to crisis—David Gergen says, "It was as if the lights went out over El Salvador, and the country's subsequent struggle to preserve democracy disappeared from sight. Out of sight, it also passed out of mind for American viewers. Television loves sagas in which someone wins and someone loses. It abhors long, tedious, complex stories and will usually ignore them if possible."¹⁹ The important question of whether the United States' long-term policies toward El Salvador should figure more prominently in American concerns than, say, a dramatic story

Agenda-setting is the process of placing issues on the policy agenda for public consideration and intervention, a process dominated by the news media.

like an earthquake in Mexico, is muted by the media's uncontested demands for an entertaining narrative.

Foundations that labor to publish fact books without making parallel investments in translating these facts into public discourse ignore the function that the news media provide in the national public square, refining and rationalizing the country's "to do" list. While the President and the major national newspapers, for instance, can have a powerful impact on an issue's salience, by contrast, "a real-world indicator is neither a necessary nor a sufficient cause for an issue to climb the agenda."²⁰ In a famous study of agenda-setting, Funkhouser compared the media agenda to real-world indicators—or descriptive statistics that demonstrate the extent or nature of a social problem—on 14 issues over the decade of the sixties and found little correlation.²¹ Other studies confirm that the issues salient in the media correlate to those expressed by public opinion.²²

But what about those issues where people have first-hand experience? Are we still so susceptible to media's influence? In fact, the evidence suggests that familiarity with an issue may make people more media attentive to that issue, and therefore more influenced by media coverage, not less. "Evidence from a half a century of polling in the United States supports the proposition that the more citizens know about politics and public affairs, the more firmly they are wedded to elite and media perspectives on foreign policy issues," says John Zaller.²³ "Elite and media influence is likely to be limited to those citizens who are sufficiently attentive to politics to be aware of what elites are saying . . . and then the most politically aware citizens are most susceptible to influence because they are most heavily exposed to an elite consensus that they have no partisan basis for resisting."²⁴ Zaller further suggests that "as news issues come up, the public looks to public statements by its political leaders—partisan, ideological, religious, ethnic, and so forth—to decide what should be done, and is willing, within broad limits, to go along with what the majority of leaders advises. Then, as the consequences of elite initiatives become apparent in the form of policies that succeed or fail, the public judges its leaders accordingly."²⁵

Other communications scholars disagree. "People are not so passive. People are not so dumb, and people negotiate with media messages in complicated ways that vary from issue to issue," says William Gamson, who promotes a theory of political consciousness that emphasizes the role of "personal strategies" in mitigating media frames.²⁶ Put simply, on those issues where Americans have access to additional viewpoints and sources of information, such as personal or recounted experience, the effect of media exposure is lessened. The problem for issues that are far removed from opportunities for direct observation, like the Arab-Israeli conflict or nuclear power, is that "media discourse is typically their first resort." Gamson concludes with an admonition to those who seek to reframe issues for broader public participation that they "search for existing

If a social problem does not conform to the needs and conventions of journalism, it is unlikely to get told and sold to the American public.

experiential knowledge that can be shown to be relevant for a broader collective action frame.”²⁷

Ironically, news media may be even more influential on policy elites than on the public. The lack of contact between policy elites and the general public may make the former all the more reliant upon the media as a proxy for public opinion.²⁸ In a study of the actual impact of what he termed “icons of outrage,” or those famous photos widely credited with having had an impact on foreign policy attitudes among the public (for example, vicious dogs attacking Black protesters in Selma, Alabama), David Perlmutter found instead a “first person effect where discourse elites feel that a picture has an effect on them (or should have one) and then, often falsely, project this effect on the general viewing public.”²⁹ In other words, highly news attentive people, such as public officials, assumed that the images being broadly distributed by the media affected others in precisely the same way and to the same degree that the images affected them. This was not always the case. But, regardless of actual public opinion, Perlmutter found that widely disseminated news pictures, such as those associated with events like the revolt of Chinese dissidents in Tiananmen Square, have a powerful effect on policymakers: “Policy is explained by pointing at specific images in the press.”³⁰

Framing

The attention to volume and placement of media coverage that is the focus of agenda-setting does not tell the whole story about the influence of communications on public opinion. The type of story that is told by the news media also powerfully affects the public’s understanding of social issues. The media’s influence on how we think about social problems lasts far beyond our memory of a particular newscast or news topic. The way the news is “framed” on many issues sets up habits of thought and expectation that, over time, are so powerful that they serve to configure new information to conform to this frame.³¹ Framing refers to the way a story is told—its selective use of particular symbols, metaphors, and messengers, for example—and to the way these cues, in turn, trigger the shared and durable cultural models that people use to make sense of their world. The frame is the organizing principle, what a story is “about,” supported by the frame elements of messenger, metaphor, etc., which combine to support the overall idea. Understanding which frames serve to advance which policy options with which groups is central to communications strategy. For example, the documented tendency in U.S. media to focus on U.S. contributions to foreign aid to the virtual exclusion of those of other countries is undoubtedly responsible for the equally documented assessment that Americans resist increasing foreign assistance because they believe the U.S. is “doing it all.” Headlines like the following help establish this opinion, as they are told within the frame of U.S. generosity:

The way the news is “framed” sets up habits of thought and expectation that are so powerful they serve to configure new information to conform to the frame.

U.S., Japan, Other Nations Pledge \$7.9 Billion in Food Subsidies (subheadline of a story explaining that the U.S. pledged \$300 million to Indonesia, while Japan pledged \$1.3 billion and unidentified other countries pledged \$6.3 billion.)

—*Washington Post*, July 31, 1998, p. A20

Framing choices in news are also evident when issues like unemployment, homelessness, or lack of health insurance are portrayed as individual choices or misfortunes, focusing in tightly on the individual impacts of social and political forces, and not on the broader conditions that shape and constrain those choices. These narrative decisions have consequences for public thinking, as they tend to place responsibility on the individuals experiencing the problem, rather than on public policies. Consider these two very different approaches to stories about Chicago public housing.

Many Face Street as Chicago Project Nears End

David Seals has lived 43 of his 51 years in the Ida B. Wells housing project, most of the time as part of the invisible colony of men whose names do not appear on Chicago Housing Authority leases but who nonetheless sleep in its beds. Sheba Lovia Hinkle, 33, moved into Wells in 1991 and was evicted a year later because of her boyfriend's drug dealing. But she stayed, shuttling with her six children among friends' apartments in the low-rise walkups that make up this sprawling development on the South Side a few blocks from Lake Michigan.

—*New York Times*, August 7, 2003

Broken Promises

A group of mothers at the Henry Horner Project is taking their landlord to court now. The tenants claim the west side project is broken down and the Chicago Housing Authority has broken promises to them. The Mothers Guild says it is not unreasonable to expect the Chicago Housing Authority to adhere to the same standards other landlords are expected to meet.

—WLDF Local News, Chicago Video Project, 1991

A decade of research in media effects would strongly suggest that the first article is unlikely to lead to policy solutions to the problems described later in the story, while the second story is far more likely to prioritize public policies and programs as germane to the problem definition. Importantly, both ways of framing the story are dramatic and newsworthy. But only one frame leads to collective action.

When issues are portrayed as individual choices or misfortunes, they are unlikely to lead to policy solutions.

Frames are important because research suggests people use mental shortcuts to make sense of new information and these mental shortcuts rely on small sets of internalized concepts and values that allow us to accord meaning to unfolding events. Put simply, the central organizing principle in any communication—the frame—triggers what Lippmann called “the pictures in our heads,” the models we have developed over time to make sense of our world. Once evoked, frames provide the reasoning to process information quickly and to solve problems, drawing upon our internal reservoirs of expectations about how the world works. As linguist Deborah Tannen has observed, “People approach the world not as naïve, blank-slate receptacles who take in stimuli . . . in some independent and objective way, but rather as experienced and sophisticated *veterans of perception* who have stored their prior experiences as an organized mass. This prior experience then takes the form of expectations about the world, and in the vast majority of cases, the world, being a systematic place, confirms these expectations, saving the individual the trouble of figuring things out anew all the time.”³²

Stephen Reese offers a particularly inclusive working definition of frames: “Frames are *organizing principles* that are socially *shared* and *persistent* over time that work *symbolically* to meaningfully *structure* the world.” (All emphases in the original.)³³ Further, frames have consequences. As Charlotte Ryan observes: “Every frame defines the issue, explains who is responsible, and suggests potential solutions. All of these are conveyed by images, stereotypes, or anecdotes.”³⁴ For example, experimental research by Gilliam and Iyengar³⁵ has shown that the pervasive influence of what they call “the crime script” (crime is violent and perpetrators are non-white) is causally connected to increased anti-black sentiments and support for punitive crime policies among whites.

The relative use of episodic and thematic news frames by the news media is a key factor in how public opinion is shaped. As Iyengar describes these two types, episodic news frames, which predominate on U.S. television newscasts, depict public issues in terms of concrete instances. That is, they focus on discrete events that involve individuals located at specific places and at specific times, as in nightly crime reports. By contrast, thematic frames place public issues in a broader context by focusing on general conditions or outcomes, such as reports on poverty trends.³⁶ The type of news frame used has a profound effect on the way in which individuals attribute responsibility.³⁷ Because television news is heavily episodic, its effect is generally “to induce attributions of responsibility to individual victims or perpetrators rather than to broad societal forces.”³⁸ And, while it is true that print media tend to be more thematic than broadcast media, the dominant frames used in many print news stories nevertheless reinforce a consumer stance to public issues such as health care, framing the issue as an individual product instead of as a societal problem.³⁹

Episodic news frames, which predominate on U.S. television newscasts, focus on discrete events, but thematic frames place public issues in a broader context.

Different Frames Set Up Different Policy Solutions

Episodic Frames

Individuals
Events
Psychological
Private
Appeal to consumers
Better information
Fix the person

Thematic Frames

Issues
Trends
Political/environmental
Public
Appeal to citizens
Better policies
Fix the condition

How common are episodic frames? In a comprehensive review of 10,000 local and national television news stories about international events and issues over six weeks in 1999, the Center for Media and Public Affairs found only 84 that took a thematic approach. Only one out of six national stories and one out of five local stories contained even one opinion on the cause or solution to the problem.⁴⁰ In another study of how local television news stories on 15 stations over a month portrayed youth issues, the Center concluded that “thematic information about youth were quite rare, accounting for only one out every 14 stories (7 percent) overall.”⁴¹ Finally, a recent study of depictions of youth in local news programming in six cities found that only two in ten stories included significant thematic content.⁴² Our own research on framing effects associated with foreign policy and youth development suggests that people will be more likely to hold individuals responsible for problems and to understand and support individual solutions to these problems when exposed to the episodic frame.⁴³ These findings further testify to the validity of the assertions of other researchers⁴⁴ that the episodic coverage that dominates television news takes its toll on public understanding of policy issues.

In sum, grantmakers would be wise to avoid a narrow focus on the “clipboard mentality” toward news, by which grantees are lauded for making as much news as possible without attention to the framing of that news. Rather, the ability to move the frame from episodic toward thematic narratives about a given social problem should be a key factor in evaluating an organization’s media success. At the same time, a healthy realism about the difficulty involved in doing so should temper grantmakers’ goals. A key lesson from communications thinking is that organizations enter a public dialogue that is already in progress, in which patterns of expectation about social issues have been formed over time by news frames. Reversing that process is both necessary and lengthy.

Persuasion

Persuasion is the ability to recognize and manipulate attitudes, defined by Carl Rogers as “a positive or negative feeling toward some individual or object that serves as a predisposition to action.”⁴⁵ The original persuasion

Because television news is heavily episodic, its effect is generally “to induce attributions of responsibility to individual victims or perpetrators rather than to broad societal forces.”

Persuasion is the ability to recognize and manipulate attitudes.

research is credited to Carl Hovland, who studied the effectiveness of the “Why We Fight” recruitment films created for the U.S. military in World War II. Hovland’s work set the model for subsequent research and suggested that appeals to individuals that aggregate to mass action remain the goal of most persuasion campaigns. Such persuasion campaigns rely strongly on behavioral theories and research to choose among informational approaches that motivate and guide the action of individuals. The questions that campaigns like these ask include: What attitudes prevent the individual from taking action? Would the target be better motivated by a positive or a negative appeal? Would an authority figure or a peer serve as a more convincing messenger to engage the target in the individual action? These questions, then, drive the type of research that is used to inform the campaign design. It is important to distinguish between the individual outcome and the collective action associated with social movements, in which people mobilize to change the opportunity and reward structure of a society which is seen to constrain behavior change in the first place.⁴⁶

Persuasion campaigns focus on the impact of a small number of factors on the target individual’s desired behavior, including such inputs as source credibility, rewards within the message, repetition, and intelligence of the receiver. These factors add up to the “input” in the model. On the output side, McGuire has analyzed a “hierarchy of effects” of the persuasion process: “[T]he public must be exposed to the message and, having been exposed to it, must attend to it, like it, learn what and how, agree, store and retrieve, and decide on the basis of it, down to behaving on the basis of that decision, getting reinforced for so behaving, and engaging in post compliance activity (such as proselytizing others or reorganizing one’s related beliefs) that consolidates the new position induced by the communication.”⁴⁷

Persuasion theorists focus on the responses of the target audience to messages which are largely seen as “pushed out” through media, but not interactive to the degree that cognitive theorists would suggest is the case.⁴⁸ From the cognitive theory literature comes the popular concept of “inoculation”—overcoming the target’s resistance to a message by anticipating and including the rebuttal in the original message. For example, a persuasion campaign oriented to improving children’s health might adopt a message like, “Oral health: it’s not just about your teeth,” building off the documented impression that one of the major personal obstacles to brushing is the erroneous belief that the health of the mouth does not influence overall health. Evaluated from a framing perspective, critics of this approach would say that reminding people of what they believe simply allows them to make the fast and frugal cognitive connection to their enduring belief system and to be done with the message. Moreover, the call to action ignores the biggest obstacle to better oral health—lack of access to dentists—and is therefore, misplaced energy as it further reinforces personal responsibility in place of public solutions.

The application of persuasion *versus* agenda-setting communications strategies can be illustrated by considering whether the desired outcome is

in the realm of personal or public behavior. Garbage recycling, for example, would be a prime candidate for a persuasion campaign if the goal were to use media strategically to change the garbage handling behavior of individual householders. Such a hypothetical campaign might use one's standing in the community to induce the target to make sure their recycling bins show they are a good neighbor. By contrast, an agenda-setting campaign would try to get voters to support environmental legislation, such as tax-credits for businesses that recycle. This type of campaign might calculate the potential savings to the community if its three major employers were to institute recycling campaigns and would call on voters to make recycling everybody's business by supporting tax incentives. The difference between these two approaches would be largely determined by the type of media frames used, with the persuasion frame defining the problem as personal and the agenda-setting frame defining it as public in nature.

There is another important distinction between agenda-setting and persuasion. Persuasion tends to focus on the people who have the problem, while agenda-setting focuses on the people who have the power to change the problem through political power.⁴⁹ Thus, persuasion campaigns are oriented almost exclusively to at-risk populations, even though "our knowledge of who is at risk for a problem is imperfect, and persons at risk usually constitute only a small proportion of the total audience in the coverage area of most media campaigns."⁵⁰ In this view, the agenda-setting approach to communication strategy speaks to the empowerment of individuals over their situations whereas the persuasion approach suggests blaming the victim and ignoring the power structure of social rewards. For example, a popular Advertising Council campaign on domestic violence⁵¹ focuses in tightly on a portrait of a battered woman with the following copy:

It's hard to confront a friend who abuses his wife. But not as hard as being his wife. . . . There's no excuse.

This campaign frames a social problem narrowly by focusing on the people who have the problem, their relationships and a personal action that only they—and perhaps the observer—are responsible for taking. Invisible in the discussion are the factors that lead to domestic violence, such as substance abuse, job dislocation, economic hardship, etc. A campaign that used this approach and expected to move the public toward support of mental health and prevention programs would likely experience the predictable results from the mismatch of persuasion techniques to social policy goals.

The ability of attitudes to predict behaviors has been the focus of a half century of research, with some critics suggesting that only about 10 percent of the variance in overt behavior is accounted for by attitudes.⁵² Indeed, some scholars have argued that "behavioral change produces attitude change, rather than the reverse, so that to change people's attitudes one should not present new information on the issue but rather should

Persuasion tends to focus on the people who have the problem, while agenda-setting focuses on the people who have the power to change the problem through political power.

compel the public's behavioral change; attitudes will then be adjusted to fit the new behavior."⁵³ The Advocacy Institute and Berkeley Media Studies Group have argued that this is precisely how Californians came to change their attitudes toward second-hand smoke: They believed it was dangerous when restaurants prohibited it or created no-smoking areas.⁵⁴

Recently, the definition of persuasion has been broadened to include "any message that is intended to shape, reinforce, or change the responses of another, or others."⁵⁵ Operating under this broader definition, persuasion approaches are observed in such disparate situations as Jimmy Carter's creation of his own favorable image (shaping); weekly meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous to reinforce sobriety (reinforce); and cult indoctrination of middle-class youth (change).⁵⁶ While this definition of persuasion may appear broad enough to take in all communications activity, in fact, it explains only those aspects of communications campaigns that focus on individual attitudes.

The most sophisticated persuasion campaigns use framing research and techniques, often unconsciously, to establish individual responsibility for a problem and to underscore individual efficacy in addressing it. In this sense, persuasion tends to ignore certain types of frames—thematic or "collective action" frames—as irrelevant to the goal of motivating individual behavior. When a literacy campaign adopts a slogan along the lines of "Read to Your Children," it implicitly chooses to ignore such critical literacy factors as the state of the public schools, the unavailability of libraries in a given community, the lack of qualified teachers or caregivers, the amount of free time available to dual-job families, and the level of literacy in the home. By presenting the challenge as a matter of choice and placing responsibility on the parent, such a persuasion campaign distracts attention from the broader social conditions that constrain choice.

Persuasion campaigns sometimes use framing research to establish individual responsibility for a problem and to underscore individual efficacy in addressing it.

Three Approaches to Campaigning

Approach	Example	Comments
Agenda-Setting	Save the Whales	Attempts to prioritize an issue for the public.
Framing	Who's for Kids and Who's Just Kidding?	Redefines the problem and connects it to public programs and policies.
Persuasion	Friends Don't Let Friends Drive Drunk	Provides a personal call to action and invites target public to act.

From Concepts to Practice

The three core communications concepts—agenda-setting, framing, and persuasion—are not mutually exclusive in practice. They can be employed in the same campaign for different purposes and with varying degrees of emphasis. But, regardless of the goal of the communications effort, all three concepts incorporate the important role of media in attitude formation and thus help us establish the questions that communications campaigns must consider and address in order to shape effective practice:

- How do people think about a particular individual, social, or political issue?
- What is the public discourse on the issue, as evidenced in media?
- How does this media dialogue influence and constrain (public) choices?
- How can an issue be communicated to evoke a different way of thinking, one that illuminates alternative (policy, behavior) choices?
- How can this new perspective be disseminated so that it challenges (or reinforces) the dominant perspectives?

To translate the answers to these questions into practice, the creators of communications campaigns must draw upon existing communications approaches and models that offer interventions into the public debate. In the next section, we describe these approaches and models. We believe it is critical for grantmakers to understand the perspectives inherent in these different “schools of practice” in order to assess their relevance to the goals of various foundation-funded programs. True strategic communications must make careful matches between program goals and communications practices. In this sense, the promise of communications for foundations far exceeds the current use. This equates with lost opportunity. The good news is that grantmakers and their grantees can realize the promise if they critically assess the communications experience and absorb the research, which is both compelling and accessible. This will, in turn, accelerate the broader social change in which they seek to invest their limited resources.

True strategic communications must make careful matches between program goals and communications practices.

What is Communications Practice?

For an understanding of public communication campaigns in this country, the most important duality in the American temperament can be traced to a stubborn inclination to go it alone and a recurring need to go it together.

—William Paisley⁵⁷

Communications campaigns have traditionally been classified according to their end target or locus of change: the individual consumer or the mass public.⁵⁸ Those aimed at the individual tend to draw their strategies and tools from a commercial perspective, using public relations, marketing, and advertising as the foundation for their campaigns. By contrast, publicly oriented campaigns tend to rely upon the theory and practice of politics as their foundation. In this section of the paper, we describe seven schools of communications practice that reflect these two orientations. Those schools that target individual consumers, based on commercial perspectives and techniques, include: public relations, public service advertising, and social marketing. Those schools that target collective publics, based on political perspectives and techniques, include: grassroots social mobilization, policy campaigns, media advocacy, and strategic frame analysis. We identify the underlying theoretical base of each approach, its major proponents, and the main criticisms. We look at the extent to which the methods employed take into account the research and perspectives of the three core concepts—agenda-setting, framing, and persuasion—discussed above.

What can foundations learn from these different schools of practice? Above all, intentionality. Together, these different schools arrange and deploy different techniques, based on their understanding of the core concepts of agenda-setting, framing, and persuasion, and arrive at vastly different conclusions about what matters in communications campaigning. For funders, an important lesson is that the variety exists, and that the different practices can be used critically to refine any communications campaign's theory of change, tools of analysis, operational strategy, products, and evaluation design. The simple question, "What kind of campaign do we need for this problem?" would be an improvement over the imprecision that currently characterizes philanthropic communications. The

Above all, what foundations can learn from the different schools of communications practice is intentionality.

comparisons offered below set the stage for communications campaigns that can realize the promise of becoming truly “strategic.” It is imperative that foundations interested in social change recognize that there is a body of knowledge that can help avoid the dangerous pitfalls of inappropriate communication strategies and provide an empirical foundation for strategies that can significantly advance their ultimate goals.

Schools of Practice That Target Individual Consumers: The Commercial Perspective

Communications practices that address social issues from the personal perspective are founded on the central tenets of product marketing. People are considered rational economic actors for whom a product campaign can be devised with the goal of influencing individual behavior. Communicating social issues, thus, is about applying marketing techniques to advance social causes. From this perspective, issue publics are essentially consumer target audiences, and practices like voting or developing a political or partisan identity are equated with becoming brand users. Typically, a particular behavior is the desired end-product; the goal is to get certain people to choose to do certain things.

Public Relations

In public relations practice, the central assumption is that effective relationships with consumer audiences are a function of the extent to which the organization and its issues are in good standing with the appropriate publics. Based on the early formulations of people like Edward Bernays,⁵⁹ public relations was primarily used by the private sector to draw attention to the organization itself for the purposes of enhancing the organization’s image and raising resources to support the organization’s goals. In the modern period, public and private organizations utilize public relations to disseminate information, heighten issue awareness, lobby public officials, and generally attempt to create an environment that is receptive to the organization’s message. As a practice, public relations embraces “publicity, press-agentry, propaganda, and advertising.”⁶⁰

The Communications Consortium Media Center has recently adapted public relations to the nonprofit sector by creating the concept of “strategic communications,” which it defines as the ability of organizations to treat “media relations and communications as important, fully integrated, consistent, and ongoing functions,” complete with sufficient investments.⁶¹ While strategic communications can be adapted to either individual or public goals, we have placed this approach within the public relations school of practice because it essentially promotes “best practices” among the nonprofit sector in classic public relations terms; for example, by adapting such traditional tools and techniques as effective spokesperson training and crisis management to social issues.

Product marketing, with its personal perspective, is one important approach to communications for social good.

When foundations engage in public relations, they often do so to promote attention to a grantee or recognition of a signature program. While public relations may be important to organizational goals, as a practice it is often insufficient to meet the larger public goals associated with communications campaigns. One criticism of public relations is based on its emphasis on the organization over the issue: Public relations tends to ignore agenda-setting in favor of organizational identity. A *New York Times* news story on a promising new teen pregnancy prevention program might have been deemed a success for the simple reason that it got the organization's name in the news. The broader goal of explaining the relationship between teenage pregnancy and high school matriculation to the public, or establishing the need to create more programs like the one profiled, are less relevant in a public relations approach than dominating news. Thinking more broadly, the *New York Times* story might have been viewed as a success simply because it raised the issue—it got the issue's name into the news. This kind of evaluation is often seen in foundation write-ups that claim success in moving an issue on the public agenda based on the repetition of a phrase or a slogan in media commentary, due to a grantee's efforts.

Public relations makes use of a myriad of techniques designed to test the public's favorable orientation to products, services, and organizations. Attention to how an issue is framed is important to this school of practice, but largely in promoting the likability of a product, issue, service, or organization. Applying public relations techniques to framing social issues would likely result in communications materials and strategies designed to win acceptance for a particular program by using persuasion to manipulate the public's feelings about the program participants. The reader of a news story on a successful teen pregnancy program would "feel good" about that program and those participants. As the literature of exemplification⁶² suggests, however, the reader would be unlikely to extend that favorable impression beyond that particular program or set of participants.⁶³ Persuasion techniques might be used effectively and appropriately to convince individuals to enroll in, donate to, wear a button in support of, or access a Web site about that teen pregnancy prevention program. These techniques would be less suited to leading the public to question the social conditions that lead to teen pregnancy, from poverty to social isolation.

Public Service Advertising

Public service as an advertising category was pioneered by the Advertising Council in the early 1940s. The goal of this hybrid invention was to bring the experience of traditional product advertising techniques to serve people and social causes. The underlying assumption is that memorable communications creating a favorable image will lead to the actions suggested, for social issues just as for products. This variation assumes that information, often presented as an emotional appeal, can persuade and motivate

Public relations tends to ignore agenda-setting in favor of organizational identity.

people to alter their thinking or behavior in relation to social and health issues as well as conventional consumer choices.

The advertising industry first began to deal with social issues during the Second World War when product rationing and wartime manufacturing conversion caused the advertising industry to be concerned about declining advertising revenue.⁶⁴ To address the feared decline, ad industry executives formed The War Ad Council in 1942 to use advertising to encourage support for the war (War Bonds, Victory Gardens, Rosie the Riveter, etc.) and to maintain corporate image by associating corporations with patriotic themes as a replacement for product-specific advertising. After the war, the Ad Council continued, turning its attention to a broader array of social issues.

Sixty years after its creation, public service advertising is now commonplace. As an approach, Ad Council campaigns represent the characteristics of traditional public service advertising. However, public service ads have also evolved into a tool used by other schools of communications, and may be influenced by their perspective; so it is important to distinguish between public service campaigns as a school of practice and the specific tool of public service announcements (PSAs), which can be used in service to numerous types of campaigns.

The typical public service campaign relies on television, print, and/or outdoor ads. Most public service advertising relies on donated media, although there is recent movement toward paid media schedules.⁶⁵ It is typically sponsored by nonprofits or government agencies and features “non-political” messages promoting information or behavior the mass public already supports: Give blood (Red Cross), Just say no (White House Campaign on Drug Abuse), Donate to the United Negro College Fund. “Most campaigns asked for a response from the public (and) made it simple for them to call in without charge.”⁶⁶

Thus, public service advertising—as defined by the Ad Council—seeks to apply persuasion techniques to social causes, resulting in personal actions. Traditional public service advertising frames the issue in terms of personal responsibility and benefits and, while it attempts to place an issue on the nation’s agenda, it does so for personal, not public, action. Critics of this approach⁶⁷ charge that this perspective is inherently a “blame the victim” orientation, reducing political issues to personal problems. Because people may not distinguish between public service campaigns and other sources of information about a particular social issue, PSAs can have the effect of reinforcing negative stereotypes about who is responsible for social problems.⁶⁸

With regard to specific practices, public service advertising has at least two weaknesses. First, its reliance on donated time means that ads typically do not receive favorable exposure. Ads that appear on local television at 4AM Sunday morning or on billboards in obscure locations surely undermine the effectiveness of the strategy. Second, because the commercial outlets where PSAs routinely air have no intention of alienating their

Traditional public service advertising frames issues in terms of personal responsibility and benefits.

advertisers and audience, “non-controversial” issues are the norm for PSA campaigns. This, of course, makes this strategy less appealing for communications of value to the most distressed communities and dispossessed citizens.

Social Marketing

In the early 1970s, Philip Kotler and Gerald Zaltman began to explore whether “marketing concepts and techniques could be effectively applied to the promotion of social objectives.”⁶⁹ Their mission was to develop a theory for applying commercial marketing techniques to advance social causes. This approach is called social marketing. Compared to public service campaigning, social marketing is more sophisticated in its integrated use of formative research and in the wide array of communications techniques it employs: from focus groups to survey research and individual interviews. However, these methods are used in ways consistent with the individual approach to campaigning, i.e., to determine whether the end-user of the communication was receptive to the message.

As Lawrence Wallack observes: “Social marketing provides a framework in which marketing principles are integrated with social-psychological theories to develop programs better able to accomplish behavior change goals.”⁷⁰ In other words, critical to the definition of social marketing is the notion of *influencing individual behavior* for the good of that person or general society.⁷¹ Social marketing focuses explicitly on mass consumer needs and behaviors. The approach is based on the process of conceiving, pricing, promoting, and distributing ideas and services that satisfy individual and organizational preferences, which is accomplished by focusing on the “Four P’s”: product, price, place, and promotion. From this perspective, the closer the techniques and messages replicate a Madison Avenue product campaign, the higher the probability of success for a social issue campaign.⁷²

Social marketing has evolved to include an explicit focus on the political environment because of the realization that the political environment defines the organization’s ability to realize their campaign goals and influence the behavior of their target audience. For example, the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, which lobbied Congress to restrict advertising to youth, was originally conceived of as a social marketing campaign. Similarly, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s “Cover the Uninsured” campaign uses social marketing approaches but applies these to socio-political objectives. Relying heavily on advertising and a Web site, the latter campaign also made use of news coverage, mentions of the campaign and the issue on Hollywood TV shows, and the extensive distribution of posters, postcards, and other such materials. The goal was “to rally thousands of individuals and organizations in communities across the country behind a single, common cause—raising the public’s awareness about the problem, advancing the issue of health coverage as a national priority, and setting a nonpartisan tone for a constructive national discussion.”⁷³ The way the campaign sought to achieve these policy goals, however, was

Social marketing applies commercial marketing techniques to advance social causes.

strictly in keeping with social marketing theory: “show personal relevance, create a sense of outrage, and give them an easy avenue to do something meaningful.”⁷⁴ The campaign featured gripping testimonials from real people who had lost or been denied their health insurance. As even the campaign’s own evaluation admitted, however, “some groups see (health coverage) as a personal choice and/or responsibility and certainly not top priority.”⁷⁵ In order to achieve broad visibility and show personal relevance, the campaign chose to personalize the political issue. Whether this results in broader support for policy reform or merely makes people more sensitive to their own fear or loss remains a question to be answered by the evaluation. Typically, extent of coverage and recall of the campaign slogan are used to signal that the campaign moved the dial with the public.

“Cover the Uninsured” and the tobacco control campaigns waged by the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids are relatively unique in their use of social marketing techniques to address policy problems. More often, social marketing uses persuasion to frame messages oriented toward different populations of individuals; if it does engage in agenda-setting, it does so to change norms of behavior, not primarily to drive legislation or change conditions affecting the individual. The popular campaign that urges people to designate a driver when consuming alcohol is more typical of this approach.

Wallack notes that social marketing, as applied to public health, “. . . has been criticized for promoting single solutions to complex social problems and ignoring the conditions which give rise to and sustain disease.”⁷⁶ When it does not address important contextual factors, social marketing cannot push the public toward the systemic solutions required for multifaceted socio-political problems. By using the marketing metaphor of “choice,” social marketing assumes that people have the ability to “choose” a different option and are not constrained in these choices by their socio-economic status, by competing forces in the society, etc. Put differently, this approach places an undue burden on the individual.

Schools of Practice That Target the Mass Public: The Political Perspective

The political or civic perspective is attentive to the power structure in a society and to the influence of citizens on elites. Schools of communications practice with this perspective aim to convince large masses of people to give priority to certain issues and to convince policymakers to act on the public will or in the public’s interest. Typically, a particular attitude or volition is the desired end-product; the goal is to get people to understand an issue in a certain way and express themselves to policymakers.

While the commercial perspective on communications focuses on individual consumers, the political perspective considers mass publics.

Media Advocacy

Media advocacy stands the tenets of social marketing on their heads by conceiving of media as a product that requires highly critical consumption. The audience is not considered simply a passive receiver of media messages; rather, media are considered an arena for contesting power in society. In its broadest sense, this communications approach argues for the utilization of the media as a tool to advocate for people without the power to control the conditions that affect their lives. Media advocacy practice attempts to influence media portrayals of a group and its issues⁷⁷ in order to promote the preferred policy agendas and solutions of the group—or of organization(s) advocating for the group.

Media advocacy has been most closely associated with public health issues, from tobacco control to gun violence, and begins with the assumption that “the root of most health problems lies not in people simply lacking proper health information—an information gap—but primarily in groups not having the power to change social and economic conditions—a power gap.”⁷⁸ To correct this problem, organizations such as the Berkeley Media Studies Group and the Advocacy Institute help advocates cultivate their media skills to enable them to create news and thereby amplify the community’s voice.

The annual Hands Off Halloween campaign demonstrates the essence of this approach. Instead of trying to get parents and young people to avoid turning Halloween into an underage drinking binge, as a social marketing campaign might well have done, this campaign chose to go to the source of the problem. It attempted “to convince beer makers not to use icons of the children’s holiday—pumpkins, witches, ghouls, and goblins—to sell alcohol. Across the country, alcohol control advocates generated coverage in their local news by holding media events at local grocery stores and calling on local merchants to refuse to display Halloween-theme beer promotions.”⁷⁹ In this way, media advocacy reframed responsibility away from the individuals victimized by a practice to the purveyors of the problem.

This school of communications practice requires issue advocates to become active consumers and developers of media content. For example, issue-based groups are encouraged to closely follow news and editorial coverage of their issue, whether on television, radio, in print, or on the Internet. The purpose of media monitoring is to identify the dominant media frames that cue audience members how to think about people, events, and issues in order to develop strategic initiatives that can counter objectionable media portrayals. Likewise, issue advocates are taught to pay attention to the norms of the media industry and to develop and maintain close working ties to media professionals.

Media advocacy poses three core questions to its practitioners: “What do we want? Who has the power to make it happen? What do they need to hear?”⁸⁰ The answers to the first two questions engage advocates in identifying desired policy changes and the public actors who control them. To

Media advocacy attempts to influence media portrayals of a group and its issues in order to promote preferred policy agendas and solutions.

answer the third question, polling and focus groups are sometimes used to get the message right so that advocates can seize upon the images and organizing themes that effectively transform a private issue like teen smoking into a public concern. Community groups are involved in crafting the media messages so that they reflect “the broad values and goals of the group.”⁸¹

The practice of media advocacy is explicitly focused on agenda-setting, considering news and editorial media as keys to achieving policy change. Media advocacy practitioners have developed instructional materials to help community groups understand the principles of framing and to conduct their own content analysis of frames in the news. Likewise, advocates have conducted newsroom seminars to encourage journalists to widen their perceptual lens. In this emphasis, the practices of the media advocacy school of communications are in direct opposition to the techniques of persuasion, which target individual behavior. Media advocates try to persuade elected officials to change policies that constrain individual behavior and choice.

A great irony of media advocacy work is that while it has served as a democratizing corrective to social marketing approaches, it has produced an antidemocratic bias of its own. Because much of the work of media advocates focuses on a small core of activists concerned with changing the culture and behavior of media and policy elites, it underestimates the value of mass opinion in convincing elites and sustaining the frame of public responsibility. Among media advocacy promoters, the balance between attention to expert and elite policy agendas, and mass publics, is skewed toward the former.

Grassroots Mobilization

For many years the Boston Media Research and Action Project (MRAP) has trained grassroots organizations to influence media content. In particular, sociologists William Gamson and Charlotte Ryan have drawn on the study of social movements to call attention to the power differentials between community-based organizations (and their constituencies) and media institutions. According to their line of reasoning, advocates must develop strategies that allow marginalized groups to properly interpret and effectively access media channels. Grassroots social mobilization seeks to use the media to influence the allocation of public resources in a more equitable manner. Using the techniques of this school of communications practice, community groups can have a democratizing influence on the construction of solutions to social problems.

Much of the work of grassroots advocacy centers on building the communications capacity of community-based organizations. The implicit theory of change is that people are empowered when they have a better grasp of how and why media influence those issues important to their organizations and communities. For instance, practitioners use trainings, workshops, and Web-based materials to support the communications

Media advocacy poses three core questions: “What do we want? Who has the power to make it happen? What do they need to hear?”

activities of organizations that are generally unable to mount full-scale communications programs and activities within their organizations. One relatively low-cost investment in understanding media had a profound impact on the public portrayal of a low-income neighborhood. In a training conducted by the Center for Communications and Community for the Making Connections project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, journalists were brought in to help community activists in San Diego develop strategies for changing the depictions of their neighborhoods in the San Diego *Union Tribune* newspaper. After much griping about stereotyped photographs showing graffiti-strewn street corners, the activists were urged to contact the photographer directly. This had never occurred to the activists as an option. It resulted in an invitation to the photographer for a tour of the neighborhood and suggestions of better locations. The transformation of the neighborhood's image was complete when new front-page photos began to appear regularly in that newspaper.⁸²

A second area of attention for grassroots mobilizers is the frames promoted in media. Practitioners decry the limited numbers and types of frames and seek to discern new frames that can effectively capture and promote new power relationships in the society. As Gamson has said, "If we relied solely on mass media samples to identify conceptual frames, we would run the risk of missing frames that, although culturally available, have no visibility in media discourse."⁸³ In an example described for Grantmakers for Children, Youth, and Families,⁸⁴ Gamson and co-author Adria Goodson explain how MRAP went about reframing media coverage in Boston associated with the death of a child by a babysitter, while the mother had taken a job to avoid a pending welfare cutoff. "The initial media reports sought someone to blame while ignoring the larger issues raised by the incident," the authors charge. In this, they played into the readily available media stereotype of the bad and irresponsible welfare mother. Working with a journalist, MRAP was able to frame a follow-up story "within the bigger picture of welfare reform and the state's inadequate support for child care." Following Gamson's earlier statement, the media frame most available to people lacked context but, once exposed to a new story that related to a problem they know to be true—lack of available child care—the public could understand the problem as "not merely a private responsibility but a public one as well."⁸⁵

Grassroots mobilization practitioners study media frames in order to develop alternative strategies or "collective action frames" designed to catapult an issue onto the public agenda. These collective action frames have three frame components, according to Gamson and Goodson: "injustice (i.e., an understanding of the human actors who carry the onus for bringing about harm and suffering), agency (i.e., a sense that it is possible to change conditions or policies by acting together in some way), and identity (i.e., a sense that the 'we' who can change things exists in opposition to some 'they' with different values or interests)."⁸⁶ By contrast, persuasion techniques are criticized by these authors as methods of individualistic

Grassroots social mobilization seeks to use the media to influence the allocation of public resources in a more equitable manner.

propaganda, tools of control designed to preserve the *status quo* through the demobilization of individuals.

Policy Campaigns

Public interest or public policy campaigns apply the tools and strategies of electoral campaigning to non-election campaigns, often with the goal of passing a particular piece of legislation. This approach utilizes the narrow strategy of controlled policy messages primarily aimed at policymakers. These campaigns are designed to directly influence decisionmakers—as opposed to influencing either the media or public opinion as an indirect method of influencing decisionmakers.

Policy campaigns typically involve writing reports, mass mailings, and lobbying public officials. They may also incorporate elements of social marketing, such as paid advertisements, although they often do so with carefully calculated media buys aimed at reaching members of Congress or other policy elites—the quarter page ad on the opinion page of the *Washington Post*. Trade associations, labor unions, and public interest groups all participate in this kind of campaigning: drafting policy reports in support of specific policy objectives, developing relationships with powerful actors in the policy process, and providing information to the general public. Change in public opinion, however, is seen only as a means to influence policymakers. For instance, campaigns of this sort use “publicity polls” to demonstrate high levels of support for the policy of interest, as opposed to the kind of formative research used in social marketing.

Critics of this school point to its heavy dependence on rational choice and a traditional information-processing model, and its tendency to rely on facts and information gain to predict support.⁸⁷ In this sense, policy campaigns suffer from the same criticism leveled at political campaigns: “[T]here has been only a modest evolution from hypodermic thinking to more sophisticated models of persuasion that recognize the interaction between campaign messages and the voter.”⁸⁸ While policy campaigns recognize the importance of agenda-setting, they ignore the lessons of framing and use antiquated models of persuasion, resulting in a “squeaky wheel” approach to politics—as in “the squeaky wheel gets the grease” and those constituents who yell loudest get the most attention from policymakers. This criticism might help explain the phenomenon that the public consistently, and by huge margins, endorses gun control, but lawmakers do not, presumably because of the punitive tactics waged by a small number of NRA members.

The Better World Fund’s campaign “Great Nations Keep Their Word”⁸⁹ is an example of this type of campaigning, in which lawmakers are essentially shamed into supporting the payment of delinquent United Nations’ dues through highly visible advertising in the *Washington Post*. This campaign places advertising in places where lawmakers are likely to see it, and implies that the whole world is watching their vote. The

Policy campaigns are designed to directly influence decisionmakers—as opposed to influencing the media or public opinion.

following ad ran in the *Washington Post*, the *Washington Times*, the *Weekly Standard*, *Roll Call*, *Congress Daily AM*, and *CQ Daily Monitor*:

We Promised.

Two years ago, we made a promise to the United Nations; America would pay its overdue UN bills, a debt that was straining the UN's ability to do its job. For the last two years, we've kept our promise and helped the UN make a difference.

But with a third payment still due, we haven't kept the promise of the 1999 Helms-Biden legislation. We should do so now. Congress should act quickly to complete legislation to settle our UN debt. . . .

—www.betterworldfund.org, 2001

A single full-page ad in the *New York Times* or *Washington Post* is often used to signal to lawmakers that the public or influential groups are watching their votes on a particular issue. This ad in the *New York Times* puts Congress on notice that the business community will not condone proposed changes to Head Start:

If only ALL our investments paid off like Head Start. 90 business leaders urge Congress to stand up and fight for Head Start.

—*New York Times*, October 19, 2003

In addition to the impressive list of business leaders, the ad offers a tear off coupon that allows people to “add my name to the long list of citizens calling for Congress to renew its commitment to Head Start.”⁹⁰

While these campaigns can be viewed as responding to the literature that suggests policymakers read the press as the proxy for public opinion, there is some evidence that policymakers have become more and more sophisticated about these “simulated grassroots campaigns” which are orchestrated by interest groups inside the Beltway and often lack the bite to back up their bark.⁹¹

Strategic Frame Analysis

Designed consciously to address perceived shortcomings inherent in both the personal and political models of communications, strategic frame analysis (SFA) is a multidisciplinary, multi-method approach that pays attention to the public's deeply held worldviews and widely held assumptions.⁹² SFA acknowledges the power of the media and the role of both elite opinion and grassroots activism; on the other hand, it also incorporates thinking and practice on the nature of mass publics. Developed by the FrameWorks Institute and UCLA's Center for Communications and Community, it has been applied to such varied issues as community

Strategic frame analysis acknowledges the power of the media and the role of both elite opinion and grassroots activism.

development, the environment, gender equity, and child and youth development.

Strategic frame analysis is different from other communications approaches in several important respects. At a broad level, this practice is a marriage of both basic and applied research. The foundation is a perception among issue advocates that current policy solutions are being driven by skewed public perceptions of reality which result in proposals that differ markedly from those proposed by experts. The SFA approach incorporates research to test the assumption that public perception is indeed at variance with expert remedies, as defined by scholars and policy advocates. The SFA approach explores the contribution of media to this distortion, documenting the specific impact on public attitudes of the dominant frames of news coverage.

For example, content analysis of the portrayal of adolescents on local news conducted by the Center for Media and Public Affairs for the FrameWorks Institute revealed that the three most frequently reported topics of youth news on six local stations in 1999 were crime victimization, accidents involving young people, and violent juvenile crime, accounting for nearly half (46 percent) of all coverage of youth.⁹³ This news portrayal flies in the face of expert assessment; James Youniss and Allison Ruth have shown that, for example, on virtually every social indicator, “youth today are at least as healthy or healthier than their parents’ generation.”⁹⁴ Using survey research methods adapted to SFA, FrameWorks researchers were able to demonstrate empirically that this “at risk” view of the world has serious consequences for those who seek to engage the public in supporting such programs as mental health counseling for teens, after-school programs, opportunities for volunteer work, team sports, etc. The dominant news frame of teens in trouble does nothing to build public will to advance policies for youth. Survey respondents were exposed to a series of questions designed to prime a particular way of thinking about youth before responding to a series of key indicator questions. The only policy receiving a statistically significant increase in priority under the teens in trouble prime was to require parental involvement in the schools. Furthermore, descriptive statistics, whether positive or negative, did nothing to shift perceptions of youth or encourage support for policies to benefit youth. By contrast, when respondents were presented with positive images of youth, virtually every policy moved closer to solutions espoused by adolescent experts.⁹⁵

This use of research methods to document and experiment with frame effects is one unique contribution of SFA. Drawing from an identification of different models people hold of a particular issue, tests are developed to determine their impact on policy positions. A range of methods are used—from survey research to media effects experiments. The results of this work are then shared with issue advocates through trainings, toolkits, and interactive online courses designed to help advocates frame their communications in ways that have the greatest potential for encouraging

public reconsideration of an issue (e.g., alternative policy solutions). For example, in the case of the SFA research on adolescent issues, policy advocates were shown how to prime for better policy support by using different images of youth associated with volunteer service, team sports, and performance arts. In addition to examples of each approach, advocates were shown the impact of these communications choices on policy support, with reference to the research.

This approach is strategic in the sense that it empirically tests for the impact of dominant frames on public reasoning and volition and then develops and tests alternative *reframes*. Reframing is intended to change “the context of the message exchange”⁹⁶ so that different interpretations and probable outcomes become visible to the public. The objective is to enable issue advocates to assess the extent to which rival frames produce different decision outcomes. Working with policy advocates in preparing for the release of a major report, for example, SFA research is used to outline the message strategy, to provide specific examples of the reframe, and subsequently, to monitor the degree to which resulting news coverage was “on frame.” On issues from environmental policy to children’s issues, SFA has been able to drive the public discourse in a different direction from the episodic, crisis-oriented frame often adopted by advocates and journalists alike in describing social problems.⁹⁷

Because it tests competing theoretical arguments, strategic frame analysis offers policy advocates a way to work systematically through the challenges that are likely to confront the introduction of new legislation or social policies. It informs their work by helping them anticipate attitudinal barriers to support and developing research-based strategies to overcome public misunderstanding. By understanding that most depictions of at-risk teens are likely to result in public attribution of responsibility to parents, advocates can dispense with this ineffective communications strategy in favor of one that demonstrates the values youth acquire from such programs as arts, sports, and volunteering and to use these frames to open up a discussion that is far closer to the asset-based approach championed by many youth development experts.

Strategic frame analysis pays attention to agenda-setting by acknowledging the influence of media on opinion and on the public’s frame repertoire. Using qualitative and quantitative tools heretofore applied primarily to persuasion campaigns, it analyzes the impact of various frames on people’s attitudes to public policies. Like other schools of practice, strategic frame analysis has limitations. For example, the breadth of inquiry requires a substantial commitment of resources. SFA is costly also because it is an approach that is most effective in long-term engagements—compared, for example, to the more immediate “pitch and place” tactics of social marketing and public policy campaigns designed to produce quick legislative results. Additionally, SFA relies on a high-level of expertise in the analysis of frames and the manufacture of new frames. Typically, experts in such fields as political psychology, cultural anthropology, and

Strategic frame analysis tests competing theoretical arguments, enabling policy advocates to systematically work through challenges to new legislation or policy.

cognitive linguistics are engaged in the analytical process. While SFA practitioners disseminate and explain the results, the approach is less democratic than media advocacy in the production of messages; while SFA gleans potential frame solutions from community advocates, it insists on validating these hypotheses through research. And while community voices are engaged in these campaigns, considerable research is devoted to understanding which messengers are most likely to result in greater public support for an issue. Finally, SFA's orientation to public as opposed to private action directs its attention to the most commonly held cultural frames, leaving it vulnerable to charges that it overlooks minority views in favor of the most widely shared framing solutions, and that it does not pay adequate attention to the views of policy elites that control the power structure without regard to public opinion.

Communications Practice: Tools and Techniques

Each of the above schools of practice represents a particular perspective on the task of integrating what we know about how communications media affect individual consumers and mass publics with the principal techniques of communications practice. Another way to approach the arena of communications is to consider the specific range of tools and techniques that can be enlisted to support different organizational objectives. This discussion is organized around Harold Lasswell's enduring five-questions model of communications: "Who says what to whom via what channels with what effects?"⁹⁸ Later researchers added a sixth important question: Why?⁹⁹ For each of the six questions, we first present research that supports and explains its importance, followed by a series of leading questions to guide communications planners through decisions about each element of a campaign. Regardless of the approach adopted among those discussed above, the planning process for these topical areas is applicable.

Why Communicate? (Problem Definition)

Organizations must first be able to answer the question: What is the problem? The initial step toward a solid communications plan is the accumulation of descriptive data and expert opinion to explain the overall problem the organization wishes to address. In so doing, it is important to determine whether communications planners perceive it to be a public or a private problem, and the extent to which public attitudes and perceptions are also part of the problem. For example, documented stereotypes about race and teenage pregnancy might have been a mitigating factor in generating support for a teen after-school program. By establishing the social context, an organization can begin to understand the role that communications plays in the definition of the problem, as well as in the solution.

The second step is to identify the organization's policy agenda or other solutions to ameliorate the problem. Too often, groups have failed to identify precisely what short-term and long-term outcomes they hope to achieve as a result of their overall effort. In order to measure effectiveness of communications over time, the group must advance a position, a

A solid communications plan begins with descriptive data and expert opinion that explain the overall problem the organization wishes to address.

policy, or some prescriptive solution to the problem which can serve as a benchmark against which to measure public understanding and support.

The third step is to identify the organization's theory of change. A theory of change defines how the world works. Underlying each of the schools of practice described in the preceding section is a theory about who has the power to make change and what will propel them to do so. "[A] theory of change can sharpen the planning and implementation of an initiative,"¹⁰⁰ facilitate the evaluation process, and make clear why one is communicating, as opposed to adopting other strategies, from lobbying to service delivery. The articulated theory should also make clear the organization's approach to the core concepts of agenda-setting, framing, and persuasion, and point to some schools of practice as more relevant than others. Given the volume of attention paid to this topic within recent literature, we have chosen not to duplicate that discussion, but we encourage funders and their grantees to familiarize themselves with this important aspect of their communications planning.

Finally, it is important to determine the precise role that communications can play as part of an overall strategy for solving the problem identified. For example, the overall strategy for sustaining and expanding a proven approach to youth involvement in after-school programs might seek to secure more state and local funds for programs that reduce high school drop-out rates. A number of strategies would be planned, only some of which are communications-oriented. The problem that communications must solve might be making voters aware that cost-effective solutions to teen drop-out rates exist and are not fully funded. Another problem communications might solve is to make policymakers aware that voters strongly support investing in programs to reduce high school drop-out rates. In either case, the point is that the communications focus is not synonymous with the social problem itself.

At the problem identification stage of planning a communications strategy, the questions that organizations need to address include:

- What is the social problem we are addressing?
- What are its characteristics?
- What do people already know about it, and how do they think about it?
- What have been the dominant frames of media coverage of the issue?
- What do we think should be done to improve/solve it?
- What do experts believe should be done to improve/solve it?

A theory of change can sharpen the planning and implementation of an initiative, facilitate the evaluation process, and make clear why one is communicating.

- What is our policy agenda or what are our objectives in tackling this problem?
- What is our theory of change, e.g., how do we think our efforts can prove helpful?
- What objective indicators would suggest to us that opinion/policy/behavior is moving in the right direction?
- What is the appropriate role for communications in the broader strategy?
- What schools of communications practice seem best oriented to this problem?

Communicate to Whom? (Audience)

The appropriate target publics for a communications campaign should become obvious as an organization assesses the problem and its theory of social change. However, communications planners sometimes confuse the locus of the behavior or attitude change desired—individuals, mass publics, specific subgroups, or elites—which can undermine an entire communications strategy. The question of who has the power to make change needs to be distinguished from the easier issue of who wants to listen to your message.

“Audience segmentation” is the term used to disaggregate mass publics by specific demographics such as race and gender, partisanship, socio-economic status, or such “psychographics” as Soccer Moms or Yuppies. The more definitive you can be about the specific audience you seek, the more likely you are to be able to plan a very targeted and efficient campaign. Given limited resources, for example, a campaign that sought to enlist people in protecting the health of oceans might look first to those who live along the coastal waterways, targeting media resources to California and Florida in an effort to take that visibility nationwide at a future date. At the same time, for a campaign focused primarily on agenda-setting, an organization may need to sequence its communications in order to take advantage of the impact of one audience on another and avoid the cost of a mass campaign—e.g., beginning with “influentials,” moving to op/eds and editorial pages, and using these to reach policymakers. For example, the policy campaigns reviewed earlier focused their media purchases narrowly on those outlets most visible to lawmakers and policy influentials and did not waste time or money reaching those lawmakers’ direct constituents with mass advertising.

In sum, the questions to be addressed about audiences are:

- Which people are critical to achieving our goals?

The more definitive you can be about the specific audience you seek, the more likely you are to be able to plan a very targeted and efficient campaign.

- Are there subsets of this group that make more sense to our campaign goals than others?
- Are there sequences of groups that can build from one another?
- Are there important intermediaries that already reach these audiences?
- What other organizations, groups, and individuals are vested in this issue?

Communicate What? (Message)

In a review of communications campaigns over two decades, scholars conclude that “most are underdeveloped at the preparation, production, and dissemination phases of implementation due to poor conceptualization and inadequate formative evaluation research inputs. . . . This situation is in distinct contrast to commercial advertising campaigns, where strategies for influencing the audience are based on extensive pre-campaign research activities, such as market segmentation analysis, consumer opinion surveys, focus group interviews, and message pretesting.”¹⁰¹ Nowhere is this lack of planning and investment more evident than in the area of message development. Indeed, crafting a message is often the first task groups set out to tackle in creating a campaign, when it should be the logical end-product of an organic strategy development process. Those campaigns in which the group has predetermined a message are usually doomed to failure.

Message development has to move the target audience from the position, attitude, or behavior it currently holds to a new position, more closely aligned with the campaign goals. This requires translation of an organization’s policy agenda into language, values, and frames that the target audience can consider, which must be done with ample consideration of what the audience currently knows and believes about the issue. Indeed, an effective message results from taking the audience’s pulse on an issue and gauging its predispositions, and then determining how to effectively redirect its attention. Message testing is needed to confirm that the message will actually have the desired effect.

The key questions about messages for a communications campaign are:

- What are we asking people to do, think, or feel as a result of this communication?
- How do we know this message will yield this result?
- Does our message strategy take into consideration the dominant frames of media coverage of this issue?

Crafting a message is often the first task groups tackle in creating a campaign, when it should be the logical end-product of strategy development.

- Does our message strategy reflect what we know about public opinion in general and the particular opinions of our target audience?
- Have we adequately translated the message from the language and complexity of expert understanding to suit the educational level, perspectives, and values of our target audience?
- How will our messages stand up to confrontation and criticism?

Who Is Communicating? (Messenger)

From the beginning of communications research, the importance of the messenger to the public's acceptance of the message has been understood.¹⁰² Recent research by Arthur Lupia and Mathew McCubbins sheds new light on how people choose whom to believe. Their conclusion: "A person's willingness to follow a speaker's advice depends strongly and regularly on that person's perceptions of the speaker's knowledge and trustworthiness."¹⁰³ The value placed on a speaker's knowledge explains why pediatricians, school nurses, teachers, and coaches are credible messengers on children's issues—they have regular contact with children and are trained to evaluate them.

Trustworthiness, however, presents more of a challenge. Trustworthiness can be satisfied by an assessment of the speaker's character. But, in the absence of such personal information, listeners often evaluate trustworthiness on the basis of a speaker's "costly effort."¹⁰⁴ That is, they ask whether the speaker has "put their money where their mouth is" through an action or whether the speaker would have anything to gain by lying. Listeners are looking for sincerity, but also for vested interest—hence, the psychological basis for the concept of "unlikely allies": a police officer is a more persuasive spokesperson for the importance of early childhood education than a child advocate because s/he has no apparent reason to lie on this issue. And, contrary to popular wisdom, "You do not necessarily learn more from people who are like you, nor do you learn more from people you like. This is why most people turn to financial advisors, instead of their mothers, when dealing with mutual funds, and back to Mom when seeking advice about child rearing."¹⁰⁵

In choosing who should represent the communications sender (the messenger), as opposed to the receiver (the audience), organizations must answer the following questions:

- Who is both knowledgeable and trustworthy on our issues?
- Who is likely to be perceived as an honest messenger by the target audience?

The messenger is all important, but to be effective, the messenger must be perceived as both knowledgeable and trustworthy.

- Who is likely to be able to satisfy these criteria AND generate media attention?

How To Communicate? (Medium)

Whether an organization chooses to broadcast over the Internet or television, pass out pamphlets at malls, or orchestrate a cell-phone crusade, take advantage of “silent radio” that runs advertisements on the kiosk as you wait to pump your gas, put up posters in libraries, or send handwritten letters to members of Congress depends upon the predetermined campaign goals and theory of change under which the campaign is operating. The choice of media should be made on the basis of matching the medium to the communications goals and targets. This suggests that if you don’t need television to reach your intended audience, you shouldn’t pay for it simply because it seems like a missing component in a communications campaign. Indeed, there is no “pre-packaged” formula of media channels that comprise communications campaigns. The channels must be selected because they effectively reach the targeted audience. The one hallmark of most campaigns, however, is that repetition is a prerequisite to change. Constructing a campaign that puts an effective message in front of the most people in the target audience the most often over the longest period of time is the goal of this aspect of communications planning.

Certain theories of change and schools of communications practice drive toward the choice of particular media. For example, media advocacy is oriented toward news, op/ed, and editorial placements as the key vehicles to influence policymakers and policy elites. Those who seek to change social norms often attempt to demonstrate behaviors in entertainment media, so that people will see their favorite stars buckling up, designating drivers, or using condoms and, presumably, emulate the action. Policy campaigns might buy one full-page ad in the state capital edition of a daily newspaper, hoping to convince state lawmakers that the public is on notice with respect to a particular issue or piece of legislation. In each case, the theory of change drives the selection of the strategic media placement.

The questions an organization needs to address in selecting effective media are:

- Is our placement strategy consistent with our theory of change?
- Have we chosen media that make sense for our message and our audience?
- Is the mix of media driven by our campaign goals?
- Have we ensured adequate frequency or exposure to accomplish our goals?

The choice of media should be made on the basis of matching the medium to the communications goals and targets.

What Are the Communications Outcomes? (Evaluation)

Taking too much responsibility for broad-scale social change is a common problem in communications evaluation. This evaluation practice ignores the interactive nature of communications with uncontrollable variables, from acts of God and governments to access to communications channels. Another problem in communications evaluation is failing to isolate the contribution of the communications activities from other variables—either those that may prevent attainment of communication goals or those that are more likely than communications to induce change. In the world of philanthropy, most communications grantees will look like failures when the effects of their work are improperly specified, but many will look like huge successes for the same inaccurate reasons.

The only systematic way to judge the contribution of communications activities to long-term social change is to monitor media content and public opinion over time. While this is far too costly for most individual grantees, it is the kind of activity that major foundations can and should support as they enter signature programs. When one or more foundations orient grantmaking toward an issue—whether it's child care, foreign aid, or community development—those foundations should invest in annual reviews of media content and public opinion, and should take a longer view toward influencing these arenas. When foundations target certain geographic areas or populations, they should invest in baseline and annual reviews of media and opinion.

McGuire suggests that each campaign should set out a series of probable effects that are likely to result from the communications interventions and which allow the initiating organization to gauge the effectiveness of its strategy at each important stage.¹⁰⁶ In an important review of campaigns for the McKnight Foundation, Dungan-Seaver concluded that:

Most communications campaigns use a combination of process evaluation and summative evaluation. Typically, the former includes assessing how often the message got out, how many media impressions were made, how many brochures were mailed, etc. Summative evaluation usually involves fairly simple outcome evaluation comparing the target audience's awareness, attitudes and behaviors before and after the program. A surprising number of outcomes . . . are measured simply by the number of people who responded in some way to an appeal or who could recall certain aspects of a campaign's name, message or ad.¹⁰⁷

Rather than the typical approach described by Dungan-Seaver, campaigns need to evaluate the degree to which the communications results in a better understanding of, and support for, the policies which are being

Communications campaigns need to evaluate the degree to which the communications result in a better understanding of, and support for, the policies which are being advanced.

advanced. Name recognition or even sympathy for a cause is not necessarily synonymous with policy preference.

In our own campaigns, we have chosen a reasonable assumption model. Through media effects experiments, we have determined that a particular message or campaign product has the desired policy effect. We then secure placement in those media where our target audience is likely to perceive the product. We conduct benchmark surveys geographically, where possible, to further confirm the impact of the combined communications activities on a specific policy agenda. Given the fact that many communications campaigns operate on shoestrings, it is important to distinguish between the success that the campaign could have achieved, had it been adequately funded, and the marginal success it was able to achieve with limited investment. The latter achievement should not be misconstrued as an indictment of communications campaigns in general or the campaign strategy in particular. Not until foundations are willing to invest adequately in communications campaigns can they be judged according to the higher standards to which advertising campaigns are held accountable.

The questions to be addressed with respect to communications effects are:

- How will we know we are having an impact?
- Are there different indicators for short-term and long-term impact?
- Are our outcome goals in line with our theory of change?
- What specific actions/beliefs/outcomes will we monitor as indices of improvement?
- Have we set our goals too high for the budget associated with our campaign?

Conclusion

In this paper, we argue for a more systematic approach to communications by foundations and their grantees in order to more effectively advance the social good that they espouse in their programs, services, and advocacy. The current approach to communications is based neither on solid conceptual ground with respect to communications thinking nor on firm research principles and practices. The result is a hodge-podge of communications campaigns that lack even a common language and body of data sufficient for comparison, evaluation, and identification of best practices. Indeed, the current assertion of “strategic communications” seems to us an unfulfilled promise. To realize that promise, we believe foundations need to take communications as seriously as they take policy advocacy and program development.

At the dawn of the era of mass media, the Rockefeller Communication Seminar brought together the major social science scholars working on communications on a monthly basis from September 1939 to June 1940. In his letter of invitation, Rockefeller Foundation program officer John Marshall explained, “I asked for this allocation on the grounds that I was working mainly in the field of mass communications, and that in so doing I was increasingly feeling the lack of any systematic or disciplined approach. . . . I have to confess that my own attitude toward the seminar is rather selfish. I hope to get from it the general theoretical guidance I very much need in my work here.”¹⁰⁸ Others shared Marshall’s need for an integrative framework that would help explain, predict, and direct public opinion via mass communications. For example, in the course of the Rockefeller Foundation-sponsored discussions, Robert Lynd “suggested that the Seminar might predict the probable trend of events, then state the conditions under which public opinion might be guided in the public interest in regard to them.”¹⁰⁹

The rarity with which scholars, policy advocates, and foundation program officers are involved together in the practical business of devising better approaches to communications in the public interest seems to us a flaw in the evolution of grantmaking. Whether these collaborations are addressed to exploring and enumerating the various schools of thought that have developed or to expanding the conversation around tools and techniques, foundations can play an important convening role in communications thinking, as well as in insisting on well-planned communications campaigns that demonstrate an understanding of the way

Foundations need to take communications as seriously as they take policy advocacy and program development.

communications works, both theoretically and practically. We will know we have arrived at this juncture when communications funding is devoted not merely to dissemination but equally to understanding the context in which social problems occur and persist. And we will know foundations are serious about remedying their practice when communications funding is integrated robustly into all grants that seek to improve the social good. We hope this paper provides an analytical framework and a language for moving forward on that promise.

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Before founding FrameWorks, Ms. Bales served for six years as director of strategic communications and children's issues at the Benton Foundation, where she was founding editor of www.connectforkids.org, the largest Web gateway for news and research on children's issues. Ms. Bales also has served as Vice President for Communications at the National Association of Children's Hospitals.

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