



Strategic Framing During the Economic Downturn: Remembering the Long View A FrameWorks Institute FrameByte

As social issues advocates across the country confront the serious economic challenges in their states, it is particularly important to rely on evidenced-based communications strategies in our efforts to support and maintain essential public structures. It would certainly be easy to let strategic communications fade into the background as we rush to respond to the immediate situation. The challenge before us, however, is to continue to develop beneficial message frames that work to advance longer-term policy goals even as we respond to the more immediate fiscal conditions.

It's easy to get distracted in times like these. Experts, advocates and the media disseminate pessimistic statistics, tell vivid personal stories of victims of the economic downturn, and issue ominous warnings of the consequences of budget cuts. FrameWorks Institute's research across issues cautions against using this approach. While it may work to get you into the news, it undermines your long-term goals of engaging the public in realistic policy solutions, in overcoming us vs. them thinking, and in advancing a sense of agency. This FrameByte offers issue advocates an explanation of why such communications tactics, what FrameWorks refers to as "crisis frames," are ill-advised.

1. When we deploy crisis frames, we are more likely to disengage than engage the public.

FrameWorks Institute's research has consistently demonstrated that when Americans are confronted with crisis stories about social problems – from poverty, to health care to global warming – they interpret social problems to be insurmountable and unsolvable. They may feel sympathy for those affected by the crisis, but solutions are very hard to imagine. Crisis frames do not encourage pragmatic thinking about the repair and renovation of systems and structures.

At the same time, Americans have a strong belief in working together to solve problems and in the role of American ingenuity and innovation in moving us forward. Tapping into this ingenuity and "can-do" belief system is critical to opening up public willingness to endorse public solutions to pressing issues. When this value is reinvigorated, people are more open to seeing creative policy solutions and are able to consider their own role in these solutions.

A corollary to the crisis frame is the use of vivid, personal case stories to emphasize the effects of social problems or conditions.

2. Vivid personal stories are not effective in promoting public solutions.

We often tell vivid personal stories because we are convinced that such stories fuel public concern for issues. In fact, there is a danger that these types of stories will backfire, as they stoke a debate over worthiness. As FrameWorks research shows in many issue domains, people are quick to judge the beneficiaries of programs and services. The burden is then placed on these recipients to prove their worthiness, rather than focusing on the benefits to society as a whole. By diverting attention to people, and to their efforts or choices, responsibility is not placed on the systems and structures that constrain their success.

FrameWorks would encourage advocates to look for compelling thematic stories that stress cause and effect, environmental conditions, and policy solutions. These stories will help the public envision a way forward through these difficult times, and encourage engagement in thoughtful and strategic responses that will minimize the long-term negative effects on the people, policies and programs we care about. (For more information on episodic and thematic storytelling, please see the related [FrameBytes](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/framebytes.html), “The Problem With Telling Compelling Personal Anecdotes” and “Telling Thematic Stories” at www.frameworksinstitute.org/framebytes.html.)

3. Use your communications to fill the significant gaps that impede productive thinking about the current economic situation.

Before beginning any communications, it is important to consider where the gaps in people’s understanding lie. While people undoubtedly understand that the situation is dire due to constant reinforcement of this message by the media and their own personal experiences, FrameWorks research suggests that they likely have a poor understanding of the interplay between larger forces and their everyday lives. Explaining that relationship could be an important role for advocates and experts. While recent events would suggest that a hands-off “trickle down” approach to economic planning is ineffective, there have been few efforts to explain a different model of economic planning. In many cases, even progressive critiques of past policies borrow from and serve to reinforce this model. This is where policy and economic experts need to do more teaching and less preaching. By drawing on better models of how the economy works, how government can guide and oversee, how transparency and accountability can be achieved, we can begin to displace these dysfunctional models that are currently anchoring public thinking.

In addition, the stimulus packages and bailouts are putting government at the center of public life in a way that is unparalleled in many of our lifetimes. This offers a related opportunity to open up a fresh conversation about the positive role government can and does play in our lives. But this must be done carefully, as FrameWorks’ research on how Americans think about government has revealed.

According to this research, the public holds, simultaneously, two contradictory notions of government: (1) Government as “Them” (or associated with politicians and elected leaders), and (2) Government as “It” (the huge, undifferentiated, bureaucracy). Both lenses offer

narrow and distorted views of government. Neither lens makes it possible to view government as “us” – as a tool to implement the common good and improve quality of life. Neither lens allows consideration of a role for citizen involvement or impact. (For [more information](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/government.html), please see www.frameworksinstitute.org/government.html.)

FrameWorks recommends that advocates make what government does more vivid and concrete. Advocates should change their everyday public communications to help remind people of the unique mission of government and its importance as a set of public structures we have created such as laws, highways, health and safety agencies, and schools and colleges. We must remind people that this is the machinery that produces American success and quality of life. Getting the idea of common good in front of people has a salutary effect on the divisiveness that attaches to hard economic times.

Finally, it is important to remember that the country will not always be experiencing an current economic downturn. While we must attend to and respond to the immediate and difficult choices before us, we also have to keep our long-term goals and vision in mind. In a very real sense, the current difficulties have opened up new opportunities to change the public conversation on the issues we care about – health care, the environment, early childhood, youth development, racism. While we work to solve immediate problems, we must also hold onto the hard-fought progress we have made. Keeping both the near and far horizons in view will ensure that we will continue to move forward in the years ahead. Ask yourself if the story you are telling is one you can afford to inherit after the economy recovers.

“The art of political rhetoric has been to reconfigure stories in a manner that affirms and amplifies the changes already occurring in the way Americans tell the tales....Indeed, it is just possible that Americans already are telling one another (new)..stories, and are only waiting for a new set of political leaders to give them voice.” Robert Reich, Four Parables of American Thought

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About FrameWorks Institute: The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit organization founded in 1999 to advance science-based communications research and practice. The Institute conducts original, multi-method research to identify the communications strategies that will advance public understanding of social problems and improve public support for remedial policies. The Institute’s work also includes teaching the nonprofit sector how to apply these science-based communications strategies in their work for social change. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations, as well as toolkits and other products for the nonprofit sector at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

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