A FrameWorks Institute FrameByte
Finding a Reasonable Tone

The FrameWorks Institute defines a frame as containing several important elements, including context, values, metaphors, numbers, stories, messengers, and tone. Paying attention to all of these elements will help ensure that your communication about social issues is effective in reaching your audience. In this FrameByte, we will review the importance of tone in communications about social issues. Some important issues surrounding tone, including the difference between rhetorical and reasonable tone, some of the ways in which the media environment encourages argumentative, polarizing debates about social issues, and conclude with a brief framing checklist related to tone.

One way to look at tone is to assess whether it is *rhetorical* or *reasonable*. A rhetorical tone is one that is partisan, ideological, and opinionated. When social problems are communicated in a rhetorical tone, audiences tend to respond with skepticism regarding the messenger's motives, hear that this is about politics and factionalizing, and are less likely to be open to new information and solutions-based thinking.

In contrast, a reasonable tone activates a *villager* approach and a can-do attitude. When people are presented with a reasonable discussion of the problem, its causes and potential solutions, they are much better at understanding and processing new information. Your audience begins to think about how to solve the problem rather than how to identify the agendas of the messengers.

Here is an example that contrasts a rhetorical and a reasonable tone related to health care reform.

Rhetorical Tone:

> *George W. Bush doesn't want you to think of a sick child. Not Graeme Frost. Not Bethany Wilkerson. Not any of the real children affected. He wants you straining your eyes on the fine print of policies, puzzling over the nuances of coverage -- whether you can afford premiums for basic, catastrophic, comprehensive or limited health insurance… The question is, do you care? The actuaries don't. And can't. Health insurance companies make their money by denying care. They maximize profit by authorizing as little care as they can get away with. …Bush and his conservative allies don't want us to see sick children, just as they don't want us to see those bodies in bags coming back from Iraq. They're in the habit of sweeping our human casualties under the rug.*
> (Don't Think of a Sick Child", Rockridge Institute, 2007. www.rockridgeinstitute.org/health)

Reasonable Tone:

Our vision is clear: New Hampshire needs to have and can have a system of health care that provides excellent care at an affordable cost and leaves no one out. It is also clear to us that if we do not take steps, beginning now, to work together to stabilize our health care system—to strengthen and restore the pillars of government, private and individual support for the health care system—we could face a rapid deterioration of the system that will affect all of us: rich, poor or in-between, North Country or Seacoast, young or old, insured or not.
(STEPPING UP TO THE FUTURE, A Healthier Health Care System for New Hampshire", The Endowment for Health, 2005. www.endowmentforhealth.org/_docs/59.pdf)

Unfortunately, the media environment in the US encourages and supports highly rhetorical, argumentative communications about social issues. In her book, *The Argument Culture, Stopping America's War of Words*, psychologist Deborah Tannen says, "The argument culture urges us to approach the world -- and the people in it -- in an adversarial frame of mind." (p. 3) She notes that in this argument culture, the best way to discuss an idea is to set up a debate; to cover news is to find extreme spokespeople and represent them as "both sides"; to settle disputes is litigation; to begin an essay is to attack someone; and to show you're really thinking is to criticize. While public discourse requires *making* an argument in order to advance a point of view, this is different than *having* an argument in order to create a fight.

Tannen notes that most important social issues are portrayed by the media as having two opposing sides, which has several implications. First, the word "debate" as a way of representing issues – i.e. the health care debate, the global warming debate – predisposes the public discussion to be polarized. Second, it can prompt journalists to dig up an "other side" even when one doesn't exist (i.e. Holocaust deniers.) Finally, it obscures solutions that lie in the middle or are more complex.
Here's a brief framing checklist related to the tone of your document:

- ✓ Make sure you are not inadvertently communicating partisan or political cues.

- ✓ Establish a reasonable tone, and set up problem-solving and "American can-do" to engage your audience.

- ✓ Use a strong value to provide a universal rather than narrow partisan cue as the standard by which the issue should be evaluated.

- ✓ Use tone to reinforce other frame elements, not to undermine them. (For example, if you are calling for more nurturing public policies, don't sound harsh or extreme.)

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December 2007