



Framing the Food System

**A FrameWorks Research Report**

Prepared for the FrameWorks Institute

by

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This Message Memo reports on the findings from the FrameWorks Institute's recent research on how Americans view the food system, and how they view the reforms that food policy advocates put forward to improve it. This work was supported by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation's Food and Society Program.

The major task that confronts those who wish to change the public conversation about the food system lies in understanding how it is currently framed in public discourse, with what consequences, and which alternative options might procure better results. But reframing does not happen easily. Old habits of thinking and narratives of storytelling die hard; the frames are in us. In order to recognize and contest these habits, communicators need to understand what they are up against in a meaningful way. They need to be able to recognize the elements of the old frames and to understand why they lead to dead ends. Finally, they need to understand how to build new frames, using the grammar of framing – from Values and Simplifying Models to Solutions and Messengers.<sup>1</sup> This Message Memo attempts to delineate both the challenges and the promise of a new framing strategy.

Framing food is a complex task, as the issue touches on a number of related domains -- health, nutrition, agriculture, the environment, and the economy, among others – and the public assessment is often colored by those associations. When seen through the lens of rural economies, people think one way about food; when seen through the lens of the environment, they would be expected to think in a different way about the problems and prospects of reforming the food system. It was to explore this dynamic that the FrameWorks Institute set out on an integrated series of research projects, based on the perspective of strategic frame analysis. In addition to summarizing and synthesizing that body of work, this Memo extends this descriptive research by providing another level of more detailed and prescriptive interpretation to inform the work of policy advocates. Finally, this Memo makes concrete recommendations for incorporating these findings into a coherent communications strategy to engage Americans in reform of the food system.

This memo is not intended to take the place of the research reports, which inform it; indeed, FrameWorks strongly recommends that food advocacy and policy leaders avail themselves of these reports and challenge their own creativity to applying this learning. Representative quotations are used here to remind the reader of the research base that informs these assertions; more nuance and variety can be found in the original reports.

FrameWorks wishes to thank Public Knowledge and Cultural Logic for the rich body of work that informs this Memo. While this Memo draws extensively from the work of other researchers, the following conclusions are solely those of the FrameWorks Institute.

## **I. About Framing**

“We define first, and then see.” -- Walter Lippmann

The last decade of research from the cognitive and social sciences has greatly expanded scholars' appreciation for Lippmann's original observation. It has, moreover, yielded new research practices and practical applications that are rapidly changing the way that sophisticated communicators engage the public.

The focus of this scholarship has been on: (1) **agenda setting**, or how media influence

- People are not blank slates, but have stored their prior knowledge as a reservoir of existing frames or concepts
- People use mental shortcuts to make sense of the world; we are “cognitive misers”
- Incoming information provides cues that connect to the existing pictures in our heads
- People get most of their cognitive repertoire about public affairs from the news media which reinforces a framework of expectation, or dominant frame
- Over time, we develop habits of thought and expectation that configure incoming information to conform to this frame

which issues people think are important for government to address, and (2) **framing**, or how people think about and interpret ideas and issues, particularly how they think about solutions to problems. Put simply, this is what research suggests about how people process information:

People default to the existing “pictures in their heads.” But when communications uses different frames, people see an issue from a different perspective. This is known as “reframing” the issue.<sup>ii</sup>

This approach to communications alters significantly the way we approach research. Instead of asking **what** people think about a particular issue, framing theory would dictate that we ask instead **how** people are thinking about a particular issue in order to arrive at any given policy preference. To change the way people think, the answer is not to give people more information to process through their current frame, but rather to change the lens they use to reason about the problem. This approach dictates a different set of research questions from those used to drive more traditional research:

- How does the public think about food and the food system? What connections and associations are visible in the shape of public reasoning?
- Are there dominant frames or ways of thinking that appear almost automatic?
- Are there default frames that are routinely relied upon to make sense of unfamiliar situations or policies?
- How do these frames affect policy preferences?
- How are these frames reinforced; what frames are available to people from media and the public debate?
- How can the problems affecting the food system be reframed to evoke a different way of thinking, one that makes appropriate policy choices salient and sensible?

## II. The Research Base

To answer these questions, the following research was conducted:

A comprehensive review of previous public opinion research, resulting in “Digesting Public Opinion: A meta-analysis of attitudes toward food, health, and farms,” Public Knowledge for the FrameWorks Institute, July 2005.

A series of 30 cognitive elicitations with ordinary people in 4 states, published as “Not While I’m Eating: how and why Americans don’t think about food systems,” Cultural Logic for the FrameWorks Institute, June 2005.

A cognitive analysis of representative news stories, resulting in “Harmful and Productive Patterns in Newspaper Representations of Food Systems,” Cultural Logic for the FrameWorks Institute, August 2005.

A cognitive analysis of food advocates’ materials, published as “All Trees and No Forest: How advocacy paradigms obscure public understanding of the food system,” Cultural Logic for the FrameWorks Institute, July 2005.

A series of 12 focus groups in 5 states, resulting in “The Food Chain: Linking Private Plate to Public Process, an analysis of qualitative research exploring perceptions of the food system,” Public Knowledge for the FrameWorks Institute, January 2006.

Development of a simplifying model for the food system, based on experiments with 650 laypeople, resulting in “Conceptualizing U.S. Food Systems with Simplifying Models: Findings from the TalkBack Testing,” Cultural Logic for the FrameWorks Institute, April 2006.

A national priming survey, based on phone interviews with 3,294 adult Americans, resulting in “Upside Down Fate: Analysis of a Priming Survey Exploring Views of the Food System,” Public Knowledge for the FrameWorks Institute, April 2006.

These reports are available on the Foundation’s website at [www.wkkf.org](http://www.wkkf.org).

## III. Situation Analysis

### *A. How the Consumer and Modernism Frames Gobble Up the Issue of Food*

A major challenge that attends the framing of food as a systemic issue is its current definition as a consumer issue. Previous research strongly suggests that those issues that are understood as issues of individual choice do not advance support for public policy solutions. Framing research on a host of issues, from health care to day care, confirms that those issues which focus on the role of consumers as purchasers of a product tend to obscure larger systemic aspects of the policy issues involved. To the degree that food is

a commodity and we identify ourselves as consumers, the food system and its role in our daily lives are largely invisible.

*“Until I read this article here, the extent of my trip to the store was going to the store, getting the product that I was supposed to get and coming back home and preparing it, not thinking about where did this come from.”*

*Focus Group Participant*

In this regard, Food may be the Mother of all consumer issues. FrameWorks research identifies a “plate centric” view of the issue, and advises that a major hurdle to any reconsideration of the food system lies in focusing attention ‘above the table.’”

Moreover, this ideology of consumerism is the meat and potatoes of American media and American culture, as numerous scholars from Jacques Ellul to Michael Schudson have pointed out. It is almost an understatement to say that the *Consumer Frame*<sup>iii</sup> is how people think about food almost all the time. As this focus group informant explained, “You've got to deal with what you're shoving in your mouth. You can't just rely on something [else to take care of you]; you've got to realize what you're putting in your mouth. Nobody is forcing you to eat stuff.”

Americans stay in this mindset even when confronted with new information. For example, even after learning of the hazards and health risks associated with processed and packaged food, they cannot imagine changing the system but rather consider how it would be possible “to grow their own.”

*“I live on a quarter acre and neighbors on both sides of me. I don't think they'd like chickens in my yard. I really don't. They'd get mad about that.”*

*Focus Group Participant*

At the same time, there are powerful defense-mechanisms that prevent people from doing so. Convenience and the pace of modern life, for example, quickly identify “fast food” as modern, and whole, organic, fresh foods as regrettably lost artifacts of a bygone era.

*My sisters all work jobs and they don't sit down and eat locally grown. They get microwaves and they stick something in there and that's their dinner and that's just the way it has to be . . . When I was growing up, it was just simpler. But now there's more people here. There's more people living in big cities. In the more suburban areas it's just a more complex life. You don't have time to prepare and cook. And so you eat crap basically. [My sisters] try to do the best they can but none of that stuff that you put in the microwave was grown by farmers. Or if it was, it was grown far away and shipped over and frozen somewhere.*

*Elicitations Informant*

In this sense, the food issue suffers from some associations with rural America and the agrarian myth.<sup>iv</sup> In their review of newspaper presentations of food systems, Cultural

Logic observed that “many stories reinforce the idea that farmers belong to another century – thereby further removing them from understandings of modern problems, approaches and solutions related to food systems.”<sup>v</sup> Viewed through the prism of the *Modernism Frame*, encouraging more local products and family farms sounds wildly utopian. Witness these participants in the Maryland focus groups:

*“It's trying to say go back to the small town and have your states take more control, more regulations to take control and try to build smaller farms, encourage the farmers to rebuild. It's not going to happen.”* Focus Group Participant

*“I think it's kind of idealistic because we're not a rural country. We're not farmers; we don't grow cows any more. We just don't do that type of thing...I think we have gone too far in the other direction. I don't think we'll ever get back to local farming and getting your products in your region from local. I think it's just out-of-hand. It will never go back.”* Focus Group Participant

In this simple equation, “modern” is manufactured and “natural” is backward. Hence the common refrain throughout the research that future technology will transform the food system in ways that are, by definition, “new and improved.” As one person prophesized, “Pretty soon I don’t think they’ll even have to have land. I mean I guess they’re probably going to be able to just do something in a laboratory or something.”

The standards that people use to judge food are also part of the machine-made modernism thinking: uniformity, reliability, predictability, cleanliness, etc are seen as highly desirable, while “natural” is often associated with dirty, unpredictable, etc. “The great virtue – or perhaps drawback – of McDonald’s and KFC,” notes the *Los Angeles Times*, “is that the food is pretty much the same the world over.”<sup>vi</sup> As one Elicitations Informant put it, “I don’t really understand organic food. I know that it’s food that’s grown where they don’t use any pesticides or anything to kill off the bugs, so there’s not really any artificial chemicals or anything on it. I don’t mind if they kill the bugs! It matters not to me.” Or, as a focus group participant remarked, “The organic stuff is on the reduced price quite often because it comes looking spotted and mottled and beauty sells in the United States of America.”

Moreover, variety and the range of choices become new advantages of globalization, as people see not being tied to seasonal products as a kind of liberation from the tyranny of the old-fashioned harvest schedule. “This is just not an environment that is conducive to mango production,” explained a focus group participant. “Only recently in the last decade has this city been exposed to pomegranates on a regular basis or all the other foods. It's like because of the ability of imports we now have stores like Whole Foods.”

People also have a natural unwillingness to define anything we put into our bodies, or more suggestive still our children’s bodies, that would be harmful. Serving or sharing a meal is an act, by definition, of gift-giving. To see the gift as poisonous or flawed is

disconcerting. Even when confronted with the facts about unhealthy practices and products, most people find it almost irresistible to forget them quickly.

*“If you’ve ever taken your time and you had no obligations, just chilling, eating food with your family and just hanging out, it’s like the greatest thing. Yeah. At family get-togethers. Definitely food. Food’s awesome. ... No, to tell you honestly, I really don’t care where the food comes from. I’d rather like to think that it came from somewhere and somebody got paid for it and everybody’s happy but I’m sure it’s not the case all the time.”*

*Elicitations Informant*

Once people are reasoning in the *Consumer Frame*, the issue of cost takes over. Interestingly, this sets up another hurdle for the food system conversation. To the degree that low-cost is associated with fast food and conventional food, this transforms the discussion into a populist argument.

*“I’m stuck on the money thing. I have a family of six. I have four children. We go to Bi-low’s, it’s \$200 for a week. If you’re asking [me] to buy the Happy Cow milk and organically grown everything, it’s going to turn into \$300 and I’ll have to have three jobs instead of two jobs.”*

*Focus Group Participant*

If you do away with agribusiness or mass production, you will harm *The Little Guy*. This marks organics and natural food interests with the same identity issues that frequently beset environmentalists; charges of elitism, impracticality and aesthetic sacrifice become common. And, problematically, it places *Big Business* on the side of *The Little Guy*.

A similar outcome was observed when the idea of *Sustainability* was defined by an explanation that current food system techniques are destroying our resource base. Cultural Logic found that this explanation quickly became about reducing consumption or “people who are wasteful, greedy, selfish, careless and short-sighted....a very difficult sell in the current cultural environment.”<sup>vii</sup>

There are also practices of journalism that keep the food system lodged in the *Consumer Frame*. When covered, food is either assigned to its own section, where it is about choices we make between competing products, or to the health section, where the discussion shifts only slightly to being about the choices we make and the personal consequences they entail. When covered on the business page, it is largely about rivalries between companies and products. The food system is largely invisible and is, moreover, a hard story to tell using the tools of conventional journalism. As Cultural Logic concludes from its review of newspaper reporting about food:

*“A strong focus on consumers and a consumer-perspective obscures the real dynamics of food systems. When pieces are not focusing on farmers, they are often focusing on food from a consumer perspective that is unhelpful in a number of ways – in particular, the pieces support the illusion that consumer choice is the driving force that shapes the food*

*system, and obscure all other causal forces. Articles on food trends, on particular agricultural sectors, and so forth exaggerate the extent to which consumer preferences determine what food gets produced (and how, where, etc.). This model obviously obscures the role of the many other actors who actually wield much more direct and deliberate control over the systems – including the decision-makers at firms that produce, market and distribute food.”<sup>viii</sup>*

Because our conversation about food is so dominated by consumer thinking and coverage, advocates are likely to make their points in ways that inadvertently backfire, because they never challenge the *Consumer Frame*. Issues like the superior “taste” of natural and fresh foods can momentarily jump-start a reconsideration of the consequences of the current food system but this is a false promise. The conversation quickly moves into considerations of cost, and people reason that they can purchase the degree of taste that they can afford. This strategy is self-limiting -- back to square one.

Relatedly, when people are told that what they are eating is not healthy, they tend to throw up their hands in frustration. Bombarded with advice about what is and isn't healthy behavior, they become overwhelmed with information, and simply give up. Reduced to “good choices,” they prefer to act on instinct. Or, they become overwhelmed by the size of the task, as did this focus group participant: “It seems like such an overwhelming, huge problem that affects so many [things] like air, water, your food, the economy. It just seems a little overwhelming and just putting more local farms doesn't seem like that is really going to solve everything.”

Finally, the issue of responsibility looms large on the list of problems associated with consumer thinking about food. Consumers are only responsible for themselves – buyer beware! The role of government is to set the rules and to get out of the way, letting the free market respond to consumer choice – the power of the purse. When people try to think of collective responsibility, they tend to work within the *Consumer Frame*: Buyer's co-ops, farmer's markets, and labeling are about as far as the consumer mind can stretch. These are not viewed as extremely practical. “I try to read labels in the store...but that turns my trip to the store into an hour and a half,” explains one focus group participant. “That just doesn't fit my lifestyle. This is California.”

### *B. The Good News About Food*

All of these impediments to systemic thinking about food are powerful and persistent. They constitute an impressive set of traps and roadblocks to the conversation that the Food and Society Program would like to hold with Americans. Yet, ironically, there is an equally impressive advantage that can be derived from the situation. The topic of the food system is virtually unknown. People don't know much and don't think often about it. The food system stands in glaring contrast to an issue like the health care system, for example, where people know so much that they are immobilized by the complexity of the problem. The overwhelmingly good news that the FrameWorks research delivers is that, if the framing traps can be avoided, the issue holds enormous interest for most Americans.

*“I’m upset. I’m the kind of person that writes letters and I want to do something about it.”*

*“I am encouraged that there is a company, a group of people, a groundswell, whatever of people that are actually interested in making this a reality. I’m enthusiastic about that.”*  
*Focus Group Participants*

Therefore, part of the task of reframing food lies in getting sufficient information before the public to redirect the conversation in the first place. This is not as easy as it sounds. As framing theory explains, without a strong organizing principle to help people fit the facts into a meaningful picture, the facts will not be assimilated. Indeed, they will be consumed by, and incorporated into, the dominant existing frames.

For example, witness the fate of Cultural Logic’s early attempt to use the *Diversity Frame*, arguing that, “as we lose diversity (in crops, methods, suppliers, genetic base, labor base and so on), the system becomes more vulnerable to failure.” To do so, they provided an argument against the narrowing concentration of the system, and in favor of a multi-source food system. The results were striking: “the argument was handicapped by the fact that its central image of concentration was directly contradicted by people’s everyday experience of food. Although people could understand the basic wisdom of not putting all of your eggs in one basket, the actual experience of shopping (in the metro areas where most Americans live) is largely about diversity. The abstractness of the food supply system for most people can’t compete with this daily experience.”

*“I can totally understand where they are coming from. I read the news and I do see genetically modified crops and these gigantic companies that are participating in it, a couple names keep getting mentioned and I can see where they are coming from. But I personally do not notice a problem with diversity in the stuff that I’m eating.”*  
*TalkBack Informant*

This process is also evident in the focus group findings, where numerous potential reframes proved weak and thus facts were transformed by the more powerful frames in play in the minds of our informants. Confronted with facts that demonstrate the food system is a political construct, influenced by big business, this focus group informant rejects the implied *Corruption Frame*, in favor of the far more familiar *Consumer Frame*: “This society stresses self-accountability and self-reliance, but this article pointed out that these corn, soy and sugar crops are subsidized by the government. . . I’m guessing that the more healthier things are not [subsidized] because they’re just not as marketable.”

It is clear that one of the challenges in getting the public to reassess its understanding of food as a public issue lies in finding a compelling reason to force another look. Breaking through the clutter of folk wisdom on this issue is not easy. But, once accomplished, one discovers a voracious appetite for more information. In effect, once people have acquired the organizing principle they need to make systems-thinking possible and to integrate

new information, they quickly engage with and prioritize this issue. “I think we all woke up tonight,” concludes one focus group participant. “Maybe something like this all over the country, we’ll all wake up and realize what we’re doing to our land, to ourselves. It’s very important.”

The FrameWorks research, similar to that conducted by Daniel DeBomy in the European Union, found that one such reason to reassess occurs naturally, in the course of parenting. According to DeBomy<sup>ix</sup>, new parents are much more open to this discussion and to learning a new way to think about it than are other groups. The FrameWorks research found that people have a natural association between the value of *Legacy* and the food system. In essence, the issue of what children are exposed to, what kind of food system we leave to them, and what happens to the planet under our stewardship are all powerful frames to invite a reconsideration of existing food practices. DeBomy’s research saw this as a target audience; the FrameWorks research suggests it is also a priming value.

*“I think most of us have got children, and probably my reason [for wanting action is] because I want to make sure that they are going to have something.”*

*“I’m worried about our kids, the future. What’s the food going to be like and stuff like that?”*

*“Everyone in here, I’m pretty sure, has someone like a child or a grandchild and you want the best for them. I don’t want to leave the ones [coming] behind me something worse than [what] we have. I want to leave it better than what I had.”*  
Focus Group Participants

Food advocates would do well to recognize that Americans (and apparently Europeans as well) lack a language for the concept of sustainability, although they are strongly in favor of this approach to food and the environment. FrameWorks frequently finds this phenomenon on issues where advocates have developed a short-hand for uniting the array of issues in their work, but have not recognized that this same short-hand means little to ordinary people. It would be a grave mistake for food advocates to confuse the frame with the policy or issue. Sustainability as a concept is enormously powerful, Sustainability as a frame is virtually meaningless. “The values that are important to advocates – including stewardship and responsible management of resources, for example, are not evoked by the idea of sustainability,” concludes Cultural Logic in their cognitive analysis of expert messaging.<sup>x</sup> In fact, as the Priming Survey makes clear, the path to sustainability lies through the values of stewardship and legacy, not vice versa. A different choreography is required to put forward the idea of sustainability in a way that ordinary Americans can grasp and use.

In fact, many of the framing strategies currently in use among food system reformers suffer from their relative powerlessness in the face of strong entrenched frames. As Cultural Logic observes, after a review of expert materials, much of the information that is put forward consists of symptoms of the problem: from food security and food scares to farm wages. Without a strong organizing principle that can help people knit these

particular examples into a comprehensive and integrated picture, these scattered pieces of food system information are not additive and do not endure. Cultural Logic concludes, “Americans have no working conceptual model of the food system as a whole, and advocates are not helping them acquire one.” Thus, a primary task of the food reform movement must be to strategically introduce and sustain a *Big Picture* of the food system.

While framing research is certainly important to this outcome, frame discipline among movement communicators is of equal importance. At the same time, those values that have proven attractive to communicators – Social Justice, Preservation, Fairness, etc. – can appear non-sequiturs to the public, as people struggle to understand how these could possibly apply to a system only vaguely understood or relevant.

Still, there is great reason to hold optimism for reframing the food conversation. Rarely in FrameWorks’ research have we seen such movement as a result of the introduction of reframes, nor have we seen so many reframes move thinking in the right direction. By learning to frame food effectively, advocates for systems reforms stand to win some major ground toward a sustainable food system.

#### **IV. Reframing Recommendations**

Following this analysis, effective reframes need to accomplish the following ten objectives:

1. Redirect attention away from the *Consumer Frame*
2. Reassign responsibility to the system, not the individual
3. Associate the food system with values to which they already ascribe
4. Provide a powerful new organizing principle
5. Give people a reason to reassess a familiar topic
6. Convey new information about how the food system works
7. Get progress on the right side of reform
8. Suggest solutions that are not individual and that drive home the impact of intervening in the food system
9. Link the fate of the food system to specific consequences, especially for public health and the environment
10. Use examples where communities are making a difference to heighten the idea that positive change is possible

While these objectives should not be viewed as a literal recipe for reframing, they can be achieved in a variety of ways by combining various frame elements. Food system advocates can use these ten objectives as a checklist by which to judge the degree to which they avoided problem elements in their own materials and successfully redirected opinion. The reframing research yielded a number of specific framing techniques and elements that can be used to achieve these results; specifically:

The Values of Legacy and Protection proved significantly effective in the survey research in priming a collective sense of responsibility for the food system. *The Legacy Frame*

communicates the consequences of current food production choices for future generations and the long-term viability of the food system. When survey participants consider the *Legacy Frame's* description of the long-term consequences of short-term decisions, they are motivated to act to protect their children and grandchildren. The *Legacy Frame* significantly increased support for ten of twelve tested policies. In addition, it created beneficial shifts in nearly every attitudinal indicator question in the survey including concerns about the food system, priority of addressing problems, importance of local food production, attribution of responsibility for fixing problems, and planned consumer purchase patterns. Furthermore, it created beneficial shifts among nearly every demographic group in the survey, demonstrating that it has widespread appeal.

#### **An Example of the Legacy Frame**

We expect our food system to produce what we need now and for generations to come, but it is becoming increasingly clear that decisions are being made in food production that will affect the food system far into the future. Experts say that the pesticides and hormones that are used in growing food, and the distance that food travels, have long-term consequences on the food system's viability. Some experts are particularly concerned about food that is produced halfway across the country, or across the globe, which weakens farm economies and puts at risk our ability to produce food in years to come because more and more farmers quit farming. Other experts focus more on the pesticides and chemical fertilizers that can have long-term consequences for human health and the environment. Most experts agree that short-term decisions made by food producers in our food system have long-term consequences, and there are changes we can make now that will ensure we have a stable, healthy food system for our children and grandchildren.

*The Protection Frame* also proved effective in the survey, but less so than the *Legacy Frame*, and among a narrower set of groups. The *Protection Frame* appears more limited in its appeal to a traditional progressive coalition: Democrats, women, urbanites, and less educated groups. This frame highlights the dangers of current food production choices and the actions needed to protect the public.

### **An Example of the Protection Frame**

We expect our food system to be dependable and trustworthy, but it is becoming increasingly clear that decisions are being made in food production that affect us all and some experts are beginning to call for changes to protect us. For example, the pesticides and hormones that are used in growing food, and the distance that food travels, have an effect on our health and environment. Take broccoli as just one example. Two heads of broccoli that look exactly the same can have far different health benefits. Some experts are particularly concerned about the distance food travels. If broccoli travels for two weeks before arriving at a grocery store, it loses most of its vitamin C, and almost all of its calcium, iron and potassium, and the same is true for other fruits and vegetables. Other experts focus more on the pesticides and chemical fertilizers that can have environmental and health consequences. Most experts agree that the health and nutrition that people expect from food, and that parents expect for their children, are being undermined by our [runaway] food system, and there are changes we can make

In both cases, attention is shifted from consumer to systems-thinking, and policies more closely in line with those supplied by food experts became attractive to the public. Given the thorny nature of this issue, the identification of these powerful values marks a great step forward for messaging.

The Runaway Food System Simplifying Model overcomes several potentially lethal thought traps. First, it is very effective in attributing responsibility to the government, to multinational corporations and to collective action. This essentially reinforces the identification of the issue as systemic, not individual. It heightens priority for addressing problems in the system. The model, standing alone, has a beneficial impact on attitudes and policy support. The model combined with values shows a beneficial impact compared to the control.

Experts are increasingly concerned about what they call our Runaway Food System. The way we produce food today has radically changed, and now has the power to alter the foundations of life as we know it almost by accident. Farming chemicals like pesticides and weed-killer are permanently altering our soil and water. Genetic engineering is changing the nature of the plants and animals we eat. And mile-long fishing nets are dragging the ocean floor and altering ecosystems. America needs to retake control of this runaway food system before it does more damage to the foundations we depend on.

Without the model, food system reformers fight an uphill battle to turn around sentiment like the following:

*“Well to me, the main point of this is government regulation. They're saying that people aren't smart enough to take care of themselves. You can go out and you can buy organic fruits, vegetables....But why should the government be involved in*

*that and force the farmer to produce something that maybe does not fit the market that is out there?”*  
*Focus Group Informant*

Additional effects were found in the testing of the model through other research methods. Specifically, Cultural Logic reports:

*“Each of the elements of the model contributes something different to the explanatory story, but they work together to convey a coherent idea that strikes people as clear and important, and helps them shift to a more engaged and productive stance. The following are some of the key features of the model.”<sup>xi</sup>*

- *It provides a concrete image of the system as a whole, and helps people move beyond their default focus on the individual experience of food.*
- *It strongly conveys the sense that management of the Food System (which can otherwise strike people as a non sequitur) is both possible and essential. It helps people focus on the importance of collective solutions (including policy).*
- *It clearly communicates the seriousness of the problem – damage to “Foundations” is not something responsible people can ignore.*
- *It is compatible with a range of important ideas. E.g., it implicitly suggests threats to health (which emerged as an effective message theme in focus groups conducted by Public Knowledge). It is also compatible with and can help strengthen discussions of many different aspects of production and distribution.”<sup>xii</sup>*

The model proved extremely effective in combination with the *Legacy Frame*. While it proved slightly less effective with the *Protection Frame*, researchers speculate that it may be that Protection is such a powerful value on this issue (food as nurturance, sustenance, health) that when you cue up UNSAFE, people react strongly to anything and everything put before them as a solution. Runaway may work against that knee-jerk response by creating a fuller picture of the problem, with the result that people bring a more critical eye to the policies. Alternatively, Runaway combined with Protection may put people over the edge, so some are just moved to reject the whole thing. We believe that the positive effects of the model, as witnessed in the TalkBack Testing and Priming Survey, outweigh its fluctuations across values. But this is the kind of refinement that is often required by multiple rounds of testing. Importantly, even if the model is not used in a communication, the idea of damage to the foundations of American life needs to be put forward and in a way that is not a simple *Crisis Frame*, if people are to learn enough about the issue to engage in solutions. Bringing the system under control is a key clause of the effective reframe.

Causal Sequences. One framing technique that has proven of value on other issues seems to hold particular promise for reframing food systems. Cultural Logic defines an effective causal sequence as a statement in which there is “a clear and concrete explanation of the causes of a problem, including the mechanism by which the problem is created. ...Causal sequences include an initial factor, a final consequence, and between these a ‘middle term’ – e.g. Increasing global trade has led to *lowered commodity-crop*

*prices* which has lowered most farmers' income-per-acre. This middle term is the key to a satisfying explanation, which gives people the sense that they grasp the issue. The statement that 'increasing global trade has lowered most farmers' income per acre' is much less satisfying and enlightening.”<sup>xiii</sup> On the issue of food systems, where people suffer from what Cultural Logic terms “Little Picture Thinking,” the role of causal sequences lies in linking vivid specific outcomes with the larger system through the middle factor of a policy intervention.

For example:

*The way we produce food today is outpacing our ability to manage and steward the resources we will need in the future, and unless rules are put in place to stop intensive farming practices that wear out the nutrients in farm soil, future generations will not be able to produce the quality and quantity of food that we have today.*

Key Frame-Supporting Facts also proved especially helpful in moving public opinion, but only those that paralleled the shift from consumer to systems-thinking. In both the focus groups and the survey research, the following paragraph highlighting the nutritional consequences associated with the distance food travels proved eye-opening to people:

*Two heads of broccoli that look exactly the same can have far different health benefits. Some experts are particularly concerned about the distance food travels. If broccoli travels for two weeks before arriving at a grocery store, it loses most of its vitamin C, and almost all of its calcium, iron and potassium, and the same is true for other fruits and vegetables.*

This fact establishes in a vivid manner that the goal of food is nutrition and quickly removes the trump element of Individual Consumer Choice from the list of solutions. As Public Knowledge concludes from observing this fact as it played out in conversation after conversation:

*“Critically, an effective health frame needs to differ distinctly from the dominant food-health stories that exist in today’s media environment. While most stories in the media currently bring attention to an individual’s eating habits or the benefits of specific foods, an effective health frame develops understanding of the food system by creating a chain of links between choices in production and the eventual effects on human health. It should cause a citizen to ask ‘How and where was this broccoli grown?’ rather than ‘Should I have broccoli for dinner?’”*

Examples of actions taken by communities where change has been made helped people get over the often daunting notion that they would have to reform an entire system. “It seems like if Philadelphia can make it work, maybe most cities in the country can make it work,” stated one focus group informant. As Public Knowledge concludes from the focus groups, “when ... participants read about approaches that people have used to

improve the food system in specific communities, they begin to set aside their skepticism.” This is what we mean by putting progress on the side of food system reform; the change these communities have made is positioned as practical, necessary and desirable improvements to the food system, brought about by ordinary citizens. Here is an example of this kind of motivating success story combined with the *Runaway Food System Model* and the *Protection Frame*:

There are lots of things that we can do today to get control of the runaway food system] and turn it into a system that provides healthy food while protecting the environment now and into the future. In fact, several cities and states are already acting on long-term solutions. Fifteen cities have just completed plans to encourage small and mid-size farms in their region, with distribution networks for locally grown, healthy foods. And some states now require that food contracts for state institutions, like hospitals, give priority to locally grown food. If we expand these practices, the proportion of healthy, locally grown food will increase from just 2% of our food to 10% or more, strengthening our food system for the future. We owe it to our children and grandchildren to fix the food system now.

## V. Reframing Recommendations Made Simple

### Do's

- Start communications with the value of Legacy (or Protection, as appropriate)
- Explain why inaction is not an option, and attribute responsibility collectively by introducing the *Runaway Food System* model
- Connect cause and effect via an intervention in the system, using causal sequences
- Introduce examples of communities where actions have resulted in specific outcomes that improve the food system
- Put progress on the side of food system reform

### Don'ts

- Allow the *Consumer Frame* to take hold by not offering a powerful alternative frame
- Use Sustainability or Diversity or other term not fully understood by most people
- Leave undefined or unlinked the consequences of the status quo to the food system and the future
- Assume that people can link cause and effect in the food system
- Use the economic argument, or try to evoke sympathy for family farmers

These framing recommendations are further explored in “Talking Food Systems” CD-ROM, produced for the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in summer 2006.

***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](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org).

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<sup>i</sup> For an enumeration of the elements of a frame, see FrameWorks' Talking Public Issues Toolkit which can be downloaded from [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org).

<sup>ii</sup> For more on framing in general and Strategic Frame Analysis in particular, see [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org).

<sup>iii</sup> Defined as a version of thinking about the food system that is largely confined to buying and eating food.

<sup>iv</sup> See "The Agrarian Myth Revisited: Findings from the Cognitive Elicitations," Cultural Logic for the FrameWorks Institute, October 2003.

<sup>v</sup> "Harmful and Productive Patterns in Newspaper Representations of Food Systems," Cultural Logic for the FrameWorks Institute, August 2005, p.68.

<sup>vi</sup> "Not all fast-food is created equal," Linda A. Johnson, Associated Press/Los Angeles Times, April 17, 2006, F5.

<sup>vii</sup> "Conceptualizing US Food Systems with Simplifying Models: Findings from the TalkBack Testing," Cultural Logic for the FrameWorks Institute, April 2006.

<sup>viii</sup> Harmful and Productive Patterns in Newspaper Representations of Food Systems, p. 68

<sup>ix</sup> See draft report by Daniel Debomy, Optem, for the King Badouin Foundation, October 2005.

<sup>x</sup> "All Trees and No Forest: How advocacy paradigms obscure public understanding of the food system," Cultural Logic for the FrameWorks Institute, July 2005. p.62.

<sup>xi</sup> Conceptualizing US Food Systems with Simplifying Models: Findings from the TalkBack Testing," *ibid.*

<sup>xii</sup> Conceptualizing US Food Systems with Simplifying Models: Findings from the TalkBack Testing," *ibid.*

<sup>xiii</sup> See FrameWorks E-Zine #31, "Strengthening Advocacy by Explaining Causal Sequences" at [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org).