An Open Letter to the Foundation Community About the Importance of Strategic Communications for the Resolution of Social Problems

Reporting on lessons learned at Media Matters: The Institute on News and Social Problems, held at Brandeis University, fall 1995, with funding from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation

Issued by the Benton Foundation, Advocacy Institute, Berkeley Media Studies Group, and Heller School of Brandeis University

April 1996

DRAFT

Preamble

"The world we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind. It has to be explored, reported, and imagined." —Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 1922

Long before television Walter Lippmann told us how we interpreted the world outside through the pictures in our heads. Now television delivers those pictures, ready-made, to most of the people most of the time.

On September 30 and October 1, 1995, 140 people came together at Brandeis University to discuss how the pictures in people's heads are being framed by the news media. Academic theories, empirical research, and a wide range of practical experience and political wisdom were thrown into the mix as a diverse group of people thrashed out the role of the news media in reporting social problems.

The discussions highlighted not only tensions in the group, but also tensions in the larger society. In the end everyone was forced to reexamine some basic assumptions and to relate the themes of the meeting to their own work. In looking back this meeting will be seen as a clear starting point for rethinking the power of the mass media to address social problems.

Those who planned the meeting—the Advocacy Institute, Benton Foundation, Berkeley Media Studies Group, and Brandeis' Heller School—offer the following observations on the importance of the event, its significance for future media analysis and advocacy. The offer a number of challenges to the community that formed at Brandeis during those two important days.

What needs to change?

Our assertions grow out of our collective experiences as media theorists and strategists, as students of communications research, as media practitioners and advisors, as funders and regrantors, and as long-term campaigners for various public policies related to improving the health and well-being of American citizens as well as their ability to access, analyze, and critique information through the media. To all our colleagues in these enterprises we address these observations, which are solely those of the Institute partners:

> **All those engaged** in describing, analyzing, and intervening in social problems **need to rethink** media, discarding the old clipbook mentality born out of a **publicity-oriented** approach in favor of a new results-oriented realism that **stresses the** impact of media on public opinion and policy.

A more sophisticated and profound understanding of communications is in the direct interest of those who fund research related to the causes and consequences of social problems, human services designed to address these social problems, and public education campaigns to direct attention to solutions. Communications is integral to the work of the vast majority of funders and their grantees. It is time to retire the "we don't fund media" restrictions on foundation funding, driven by the myopic notion that communications is a peripheral phenomenon.

Current communications funding and practice by grantees has the effect of isolating communications from planning, from situation analyses, and from policywork. Communications analysis—how the public understands a given social problem and how news coverage contributes to this understanding—must be brought to the front of the strategic planning process and regarded by all as a key element of capacity building.

Funders have both the capacity and the obligation to help their grantees invest in meaningful media and in communications strategies that can be evaluated according to a philosophy and a set of realistic objectives. We submit that the practice of media advocacy is best positioned to accomplish this, but we also acknowledge its limitations and the need for the development of an integrated curriculum and toolbox that can take advantage of the excellent work conducted both nationally and in the field.

The field needs a consistent and trusted mechanism and regular forums for identifying, translating, discussing, and testing new and promising research on media effects and campaign strategies. Episodic discussion yields episodic results.

This emerging research is vital to the work that funders and grantees do, and yet it is both scarce and not disseminated outside the academy. Funders must develop new mechanisms for joint funding, analysis, and diffusion of communications research that affects their grantees' work.

An expanded research agenda is becoming more and more important as the media landscape dramatically evolves. Media practitioners need to understand the effects of new media like the Internet on the public understanding of social issues and on efforts to mobilize communities to debate and resolve social problems. Critical questions about the social benefits of these new technologies are not being sufficiently discussed, tested, evaluated, or shared.

The potential for new media to break the old frames of coverage should be encouraged, explored, and evaluated. Media like the Internet can use interactivity to change the old stranglehold of elite sources and to promote more issue-based news coverage instead of the horse-race frame of winners and losers. Whether the new journalism will realize its potential to introduce new types of coverage should not be left to chance or reduced to a decision based on its potential to increase profitability.

Both within nonprofit groups and the foundation community, communications education must extend beyond communications professionals. Other key staff members—those who direct policy and set objectives for the organization—must understand the critical role that media plays in hindering or advancing programmatic objectives.

Communications professionals need help in evaluating the usefulness of various communications tools to their ultimate objectives. They need capacity-building interventions to integrate a broader grounding in the way media work as an adjunct to other tools in their toolbox. **While many communications directors in nonprofits are extremely sophisticated about how to secure media, they are much less confident about what the media attention means and how it shapes their issue in the long-term.**

Training in communications analysis and planning is a glaring omission in the public interest field. It is not enough to invent and explain new tools; virtually no one is translating for practitioners new research in media effects, political behavior, and public opinion formation to expand their capacity. Without this kind of training on an ongoing basis, communications practice will remain as episodic as the stories it calls into being.

In the new communications environment we envision, no foundation would issue a major report—or support the issuance of a report by a grantee—without assuring that their grantees have the resources and capacity to analyze the dominant frames of coverage that affect that issue and suggesting reframing options for use by nonprofit communicators that are likely to change public policymaker understanding. To issue reports in a communication vacuum is to ignore the power of the media and to leave nonprofits ill-equipped to argue the case.

Journalists also need to acknowledge and take responsibility for the ways their stories affect public understanding. They need time and resources to explore, develop, and share new types of coverage that incorporate and transcend the media effects research.

Experiments that meet the criteria for thematic coverage while at the same time acknowledging journalistic standards for print and broadcast news should be actively encouraged and facilitated by funders. Testing the new templates of coverage should be ongoing.

In addition to continuing research on the effects of mass media on broad public opinion, new experiments with opinion leaders should be initiated to help throw light on the different ways media may affect this group and their interactions with different kinds of media.

The role of race and class on coverage continues to be overlooked and under-discussed by journalists and advocates alike. Research that illuminates the contribution of coverage in furthering or diminishing racism and prejudice is badly needed by communications practitioners.

We are all in this together. The organization of news into beats is paralleled by the organization of advocacy and services by single issues; both are refuted by new research that shows that issues "migrate" and that news made in one issue affects public perceptions of others that cluster (crime news affects perceptions of welfare, for example). No issue is an island.

A shared research agenda, the development of curricular materials, and capacity-building strategies should be developed thoughtfully through a collaboration between media scholars and practitioners and should serve as a blueprint for joint funding.

In sum, funders and others cannot responsibly choose "not to do media," for it will be done to them. We believe we have uncovered a body of work about how media work that is not consistent with current foundation funding policy or the day-to-day practices of their grantees, even those funded to "do media." We call upon the entire community engaged in thinking about and changing social problems in this country to rethink the way we currently discuss and engage in communications and to begin a new shared agenda of strategic communications theory and practice in service to larger democratic goals.

Why was the Media Matters Institute necessary?

A decade of social science research strongly suggests that current unexamined practices of mass media may be critical stumbling blocks to the reengagement of American citizens in common ground problem solving. The very real potential of this continued coverage is to make "public" policy discussions virtually impossible. As Robert Reich has said, "the core responsibility of those who deal in policy...is to provide the public with alternative visions of what is desirable and possible, to stimulate deliberation about them, provoke a reexamination of premises and values, and thus to broaden the range of potential responses and deepen society's understanding of itself." This democratic ideal, shared by citizens of all political convictions, has a direct relationship to the quality and quantity of news coverage. Media matters.

Almost a decade ago Shanto Iyengar wrote that "the lack of a theory of media effects has significantly impeded our understanding of how democracy works." The Institute sought to bridge the distance between those working to forge such a theory, and those engaged with media on a daily basis to tell the story of poor people, people of color, children, and others too often left out of the picture.

For the first time those who practice, study, and fund public education about social issues discussed the broader implications of their experience, exploring together the effects of news coverage on the public's ability to understand and support resolution of critical problems affecting the society. Practitioners learned a language and a methodology to describe their experiences in having their issues framed by media, and scholars took notes on the creative applications of new communications strategies to reframe the public debate. Strategies built on their own research translated into practical field techniques.

The challenge of the Institute was to rethink media—how we affect it as advocates, how it affects us as citizens, how we reconfigure the picture presented from a personal, human-interest tale of

individual lives toward a broader understanding of our role as citizens in a society with responsibilities for culture and our collective fate. The task involves the sociological imagination, or as C. Wright Mills put it in "The Social Scientist's Task":

> Men and women in a mass society are gripped by personal troubles which they are not able to turn into social issues. They do not understand the interplay of these personal troubles with the problems of social structure. The knowledgeable person in a genuine public, on the other hand, is able to do just that. He understands that what he thinks and feels to be personal troubles are very often also problems shared by others, and more importantly, not capable of solution by any one individual but only by modifications of the structure of the entire society. Men in masses have troubles, but they are not aware of their true meaning and source; men in public confront issues, and they usually come to be aware of their public terms.

The Institute examined a number of key aspects of media's impact on the political culture. Media scholars and practitioners joined public interest advocates and service providers in examining the power that media holds to set the public agenda. By choosing which public problems demand our collective agenda, the media shape the public agenda which, in turn, shapes the policy agenda.

Participants at the Institute learned how to decode news segments to analyze the way in which news frames social problems for the public. They observed first-hand that every news segment carries in it a set of cues that signals whether a social problem is personal or public in nature, who caused it, and whether and how it can be fixed.

The Institute introduced many participants to Shanto Iyengar's useful taxonomy of framing by episodic and thematic frames. The dominant episodic frame, Iyengar's research demonstrates, is a case study or human interest story that has the effect of attributing responsibility primarily to individuals rather than to society. The much less common thematic frame places public issues in a broader context and often takes the form of a take-out or backgrounder. Thematic framing tends to elicit more attributes of social responsibility because it depicts the context in which events take place and the broader societal forces that shape them.

Among the Institute's clear successes was transferring this language—framing, episodic, thematic—to the field. The partners believe that no one that attended the Institute will watch or understand news the same way again.

To facilitate the discussion the Institute partners distilled important academic research into a series of background readings, commissioned new research published in conjunction with the Institute, and created a demonstration videotape explaining the elements of framing analysis.

What happened at Brandeis?

"This is a forum where we can deepen our understanding of whether, why, and how the media favors particular versions of social reality and screens out other versions," explained Andy Hahn in opening the Institute.

"This meeting is not about how to get your story in the news," explained Susan Nall Bales of the Benton Foundation, who organized the Institute. "It's not about spin-control. It's not about the kinds of stories that the media is looking to tell. This meeting is about the big picture, about what it means to do the work that we all do with the media, about how news sets the public agenda. This is about the effects of different kinds of news on people's ability to understand and prioritize the problems facing the country. This is about media and democracy."

The meeting provided a unique cross-disciplinary forum not only to examine the impacts of mainstream media on political discourse and civic attitudes, but also to explore ways that nonprofits and practitioners might apply new theoretical insights toward the crafting and dissemination of more persuasive messages and compelling stories. Leading media researchers and theorists presented their findings to funders, advocates, nonprofits, and scholars of social policy who then began to tease out implications for future action in light of their own agendas and working experience.

Shanto Iyengar's two presentations distilled a rich body of media effects research that he and his colleagues have been conducting for more than a decade. Seen through the interpretive lens that Iyengar's method of analysis provides, television no longer appeared at face value. The illusion of objectivity evaluated as an effect of media—not an intent—was shattered. The participants were introduced to a new way to observe media in which there is no such thing as unmanipulated broadcasting—every image is shaped, selected, and mediated. Television news, Iyengar contends, has a built-in predisposition for the particular event and the specific case.

Iyengar attacked the idea that media have minimal consequences on the body politic. Television not only determines how we think about an issue, but it also determines which issues we think about. "People's consciousness of the political world is driven by news. As the news goes so too goes public opinion. If we have a story on crime every day, particularly a lead story, the American public is going to become preoccupied with that issue. They are going to consider that issue to be a significant national problem, deserving of political and governmental attention and they are going to use that issue to make a determination about which political candidates are preferable in meeting

this problem. And the flip side of this is that the issues that do not get on the news are not the issues that people are going to be very concerned about or that demand any attention of public figures."

"Our judgments," Iyengar suggested, "are often creatures of circumstance. What we think about the federal deficit or the performance of our President depends less on what we know in some complete sense and more on what happens to come to mind." And no institution, he maintains, can compete with television news in determining what comes to mind.

Television, asserted George Gerbner, creates the environment in which we live, a setting that shapes and indoctrinates us from infancy. Television teaches us about power, explained Gerbner, the former Dean of the Annenberg School of Communications, in that it trains us to be fearful about breaking norms of behavior that it establishes. Television, for example, warns that women who assert themselves will "get it in the neck," and television markets violence as a global commodity.

"We're not up against isolated policies that can easily be changed," he proclaimed. "There is an invisible ministry of culture. Everyone is drifting downstream. Some are swimming against the tide, but they're still losing ground, still being swept away, only not as fast."

The Institute was made up of accomplished long-distance swimmers who are used to rough waters and grim forecasts. The success of media advocates depends on a principled opportunism, an ability to understand how the business of news really works, and in recognizing and capitalizing on chinks in the armor. Media advocates are realists. They came to Brandeis not in search of consolation but to think hard and get smarter about navigating a treacherous media environment. They came ready to challenge, adapt, and rework the insights offered. And they did.

Building on Iyengar's seminal research, the presentations of Larry Wallack and Lori Dorfman emphasized the importance of how social and health issues are framed in the media. They urged advocates to better understand the framing process and acquire the skills necessary to influence the frames. They cautioned that those seeking to amplify their voice in the media often attend only to gaining access and fail to appreciate the importance of the content of the message. Framing to gain access requires solid knowledge of the tenets of news gathering. Framing for content of shaping the story, however, also requires comprehensive knowledge of the issue and creative use of the elements of story development. To this end the Berkeley Media Studies Group offered a new tool—a modified version of a framing memo—that guides field practitioners through a

methodology to determine how the issue is being framed by the media and provides insights into how to change the frame.

In this and other sessions the work of Charlotte Ryan and the Boston College Media Research and Action Project was critical to the discussion. In a paper published in conjunction with the Institute, Ryan analyzed how citizens' voices are marginalized in media coverage of the economy. She posed such questions as: "How does the muffling of structural economic news affect citizens' voices? How does the promotion of morally (as opposed to structurally based news frames affect public understanding of the economy and social spending? Do routine news practices keep citizen voices from promoting messages regarding America's economic decline and its impact on America's families?"

Ryan's conclusions must be taken to heart by those who practice and fund media advocacy. "Calling for a more democratic news process will be insufficient if we don't acknowledge that lack of resources makes a mockery of (that request)...One can predict with reasonable certainty that a more structurally based framing of economic issues will not succeed in frame contests without a well-located sponsor who can actively sponsor alternative messages."

The formal presentations of the first day sparked sharp, sometimes acrimonious, debate. Controversy is, of course, bound to crop up in any meeting that brings together independent leaders from multiple disciplines to examine issues that are complex and require personal and systems change to meet the challenges.

At one level sparring was touched off by disputes over institutional prerogatives. Journalists in particular resented what they took as the naiveté and arrogance of advocates who presumed to offer advice on how to contextualize stories. Hackles rose at the idea that good reporting had anything to do with "solutions." Arguing that news is almost by definition episodic, journalists complained that their job is hard enough without being held accountable for the exposure of systemic causes underlying particular problems. In response media advocates suggested that it is impossible for a story to avoid solutions, however implied, and that in the absence of a thematic, contextualized framing, it is the individual who winds up being assigned responsibility for his or her fate.

But examined more deeply, this particular dispute goes beyond professional turf and becomes a gauge of the subversive content embedded in much of the media effects research. At its heart this research poses a challenge not only to our practice but to our epistemology. It asks us to approach meaning as something which is highly contested and deeply problematic. It invites us to probe the

integrity of our communications strategies, to question whether the messages we assume we are conveying actually get heard as we imagine.

For journalists such self-reflection was especially difficult. It called into question the codes of privileged discourse by which the profession operates. It highlighted the extent to which an audience's own perspectives, prejudices, and presuppositions serve as a baffle to deflect the reporter's intentionality. It forced journalists to expand their domain, to take responsibility not only for their composition but also for its impact as well.

In a practical sense, however, research on media effects may also have something to offer journalists, providing insights that allow reporters to adjust form and content and produce more focused and persuasive stories. And some of the journalists attending saw this possibility. As one journalist explained:

> Somehow we have to find some means of discourse between advocates and media representatives... And it doesn't have to be framed as 'civic journalism.' The fact is that we have some obligation to ensure that the citizenry has a clue of what's going on, that it is presented in a fair way and whether or not advocates get their message across, whether or not journalists are following professional norms isn't the point. The point is what's the effect on the public and how in the end does that affect the kinds of public policies we get? How does it affect the monies that we spend? And how does it determine the quality of our lives and our children's lives?

For many of the scholars the conference served as a pathway into unfamiliar terrain. Media effects research represents a field that has been largely isolated form the broader community of social policy analysis and program evaluation. While practitioners of well-established methodologies and traditions were tantalized by the rich suggestiveness of media effects research, they continued to be skeptical about the "generalizability" of findings, although many acknowledged they had read nothing beyond summaries of the research. The prevailing attitude was that "something is definitely there that we have to learn more about." And many scholars openly acknowledged their frustrations with the lack of public dissemination of their own research findings, with the distorted or simplistic framing of their research by the media, and with their inability to bring their own research to bear on the public debate over how to deal with specific social problems. What the Brandeis forum helped establish was the basis for an ongoing dialogue and debate between researchers from which might emerge a powerful new synthesis of perspective and application.

"This is pretty powerful stuff," observed one academic, "especially the findings about when you personalize a story you get exactly the opposite effect of what you're intending to get. So what does this mean to me as a social policy researcher? The Pollyanna in me says, 'No kidding, now

there's a way, an audience, a receptivity, for social policy research that talks about institutions and institutional change and policy solutions and history. And I'm asking myself: "What's the kind of research that I do about children and families that would frame a story differently? Can I produce findings that would shift the discussion on the single teen mother and her child to a broader discussion about how she got to this place?' I'm realizing now that this is the kind of aggregate policy framing research that we could do to help the public debate."

For funders the research underscored the need to ask hard questions about the coverage accorded to grantees. If journalists are drawn to melodrama and stereotype, does mere visibility necessarily produce positive impacts? Can we elevate the discussion among our grantees beyond the column inches that appear in the *New York Times*? Can we build a new perspective into our evaluation of the potential and realized success of grantee projects that "do media?" Do we need to share media effects research with our boards so that they gain a more fine-grained understanding of how information is interpreted and acted upon? Can we use a bottom-line logic to persuade board members that prudent resource management demands a deep appreciation for the complexities of the communicative process?

"We need to focus on our board members," one funder suggested, " not in a programmatic or case study way, but to get across a very simple direct message: 'You folks don't get it. You don't understand what the media does and you must understand it in order to use your money well. And if you don't get that message across, no other message is going to work.'"

"The need to move from grantmaking to changemaking requires a more strategic effort to make grant dollars more effective," said Ricardo Millett, Director of Evaluation at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, which funded the Institute. "We must work together to empower grantees to use the skills and insights discussed at this meeting."

For nonprofits and public interest groups a similar kind of stocktaking was set in motion. Conventional wisdom has long held that abstract social problems need to be personalized, that it takes a human interest story to engage audiences and catalyze them to act. But if, as Iyengar suggests, stories of individuals lend themselves to melodrama and actually distract attention from the structural sources of private troubles, then the kind of media coverage that activists have traditionally strived for may be self-defeating.

"For many years we have taught community activists that the most effective way in which they can tell their story is to bring forward the 'face of the victim,' the 'authentic voices,'" explained Mike

Pertschuk, Co-Director of the Advocacy Institute and a teacher of media advocacy. "But if those faces and those voices, Iyengar tells us, are faces and voices of color, what most of the viewers will take away is the fame of responsibility of people of color for their own problems. If they see kids smoking, what viewers will take away is kids being kids and choosing to smoke. This research presents a double bind for the media advocate."

Absorbing this sobering possibility meant questioning what change agents, public interest groups, and funders had thought they knew. For those who do media on a daily basis, this proved a shattering proposition. The message that most people took away from the Institute was that more of the same won't work, that we can't get there from here unless we recast our assumptions about the way meaning is constructed and filtered. A growing realization echoed in the hallways of Brandeis that we must be at least as self-reflective about our own competence as communicators as we have been critical towards the media practices of others. We need to better understand the cognitive frames which our particular target audiences use to construct meaning; we need to test and fine-tune our working hypotheses.

For many policy-oriented participants the Institute was "fireworks for the mind," an exoneration to take media seriously. "I go to a lot of conferences on community organizing and a lot on criminal justice. This is the first meeting I've ever been to about media," said one participant. "I've never learned about the media except through working with them, as a spokesperson for my organization. Now I want to know how to integrate what I've learned into our policywork and community organizing and ways I can constructively frame the issues for my organization through the media."

And some groups found that the warnings had helped them husband their precious media resources more carefully. "I'm doing what I now realize is a media advocacy campaign," offered one participant. "And I've been given a chunk of money that I could have laid a lot of eggs with. I don't think I have to do that anymore because I've spent a little bit of time here."

Creative discussions did not stay limited to the traditional news media. "There are other implications for this work," observed Benton Foundation Executive Director Larry Kirkman. "Even when we bypass the mass media, our audience—whether it's on the Internet or in distributed videocassettes—is still an audience of the dominant media; and the conventions, the frames, the definition of who speaks and who's responsible, inform and shape the way they people our communications, even the communications we do control. We had better understand how our message plays out."

The essence of our humanity, George Gerbner proposed, is the capacity to narrate our own lives. Most of what we know or think we know we have not experienced directly. We exist in a world where meaning is forged through the stories we create and hear. Gerbner argued that television represents the great purveyor of folk wisdom, the master mythologist. But mythologies are not prison-houses from which there is no conceptual escape.

"This is a struggle for who defines the problem," said Larry Wallack. "How the problem is defined is critical if we want to control the solution. Because it's at the level of defining the problem that the battle for solutions begins. And we cannot routinely give that up, let somebody else define the problem, and then expect to be successful."

To suggest comments on this draft, or for more information on the Institute for Media and Social Problems and products deriving from this discussion, contact Susan Nall Bales, Program officer, Benton Foundation, 1634 Eye Street, NW, 12th Floor, Washington, DC 20006.