



Talking Rural Issues

A FrameWorks Message Memo

October 2005

This memo reports on the findings from FrameWorks' research on how urban, suburban and rural residents view rural issues – from agricultural policy and access to health care to venture capital and zoning -- and how communications can help advance a robust policy discussion focused on improving conditions in rural areas.

This work was first undertaken with the specific intent of extending earlier research sponsored by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. As this phase of the research proceeded, the FrameWorks research team examined how people think about rural areas and issues, as well as determining the consequences of those patterns of thought on a set of remedial policies promoted by rural policy experts. This phase of the research process was further informed by a series of MessageLabs that reviewed and analyzed the frames in use by rural advocates and policy experts to explain rural issues to the American public. The latter exercise proved invaluable in providing the FrameWorks research team with a deeper understanding of the tactics and strategies currently in use by the field. It is on the basis of both sets of data that the reframing recommendations that conclude this Message Memo are made.

The goal of this work is to help rural policy experts, rural leaders, and advocates explain to the public and policymakers how rural areas are affected by policy decisions and what can be done to improve that decision-making. Our research is designed to help these groups explain the challenges and opportunities confronting rural areas in such a way that those ameliorative policies, programs and practices that experts believe make a positive difference in the lives of rural people can be discussed more fruitfully. When concepts are ill understood or ill communicated, such issues rarely emerge on the public agenda nor do they attract a broad and diverse constituency capable of motivating political action. In this particular case – where a subset of the American population is perceived to be affected – it is all the more important that communications effectively demonstrate why Americans as a whole should care.

This Message Memo reports on the findings from an integrated series of research projects conducted by the FrameWorks Institute, based on the perspective of strategic frame analysis. Additionally, this Memo extends this descriptive research by providing another level of more speculative analysis and translation necessary to its application to the work of community-based organizations, advocates and policy experts. Finally, this Memo makes specific recommendations for incorporating these findings into a coherent communications strategy to engage the public in supporting meaningful rural policies.

The Memo is organized into two overall sections – one descriptive and one prescriptive. We begin with a digest of the research findings and our analyses of their meaning for the field. Importantly, it is not our intention to supplant the research reports with this Memo. Indeed, we hope that this Memo will inspire those who would advocate for rural areas and issues to carefully consider the findings from each of the research reports. These are made available in their entirety on the “Talking Rural Issues” CD-Rom produced by the FrameWorks Institute for the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and on both the FrameWorks website (www.frameworksinstitute.org) and the Foundation website (www.wkkf.org). The second part of this Memo attempts to set the foundation for the applications materials included on the CD-Rom – explaining the logic of their composition.

FrameWorks wishes to thank Meg Bostrom of Public Knowledge and Axel Aubrun of Cultural Logic for the rich body of work that informs this Memo. Additionally, we thank our program officer, Ali Webb, whose own scholarship on framing rural issues contributed to the quality of our discussions and interpretation. While this Memo draws extensively from the work of other researchers, these conclusions are solely those of the authors.

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Background

Beginning in June 2003, the FrameWorks Institute began a multi-method investigation to determine how the public thinks about rural issues and to recommend communications strategies to enhance public understanding of, and support for, relevant policy solutions. The range of methods included cognitive elicitations with ordinary rural, suburban and urban Americans, focus groups across the country with community influentials, experimental models research to identify ways to make the connections between rural areas the rest of the country more vivid, and survey research to validate and extend those findings. At the same time, we were privy to a prior phase of research commissioned by the Foundation that laid the groundwork for our own analysis. Finally, we received numerous examples of rural messaging from ongoing media content analysis provided by the Center for Media and Public Affairs and by such groups as the Rural School and Community Trust, the Center for Rural Affairs, the Center for Rural Strategies, and the Council of State Governments through their participation in Kellogg-sponsored MessageLabs.

To inform its work, the FrameWorks Institute brings together a group of communications scholars and practitioners with a unique perspective on communicating social issues. That perspective – strategic frame analysis – is based on a decade of research in the social and cognitive sciences that demonstrates that people use mental shortcuts to make sense of the world. These mental shortcuts rely on “frames,” or a small set of internalized concepts and values that allow us to accord meaning to unfamiliar events and new information. These frames can be triggered by choices of language, messengers and images, and these communications choices, therefore, have a profound influence on decision outcomes.

Traditionally, news media is the main source of Americans’ information about public affairs. The way the news is “framed” on many issues sets up habits of thought and expectation that, over time, are so powerful that they serve to configure new information to conform to this frame. When community leaders, service organizations and advocacy groups communicate to their members and potential adherents, they have options to repeat or break these dominant frames of discourse. Understanding which frames serve to advance which policy options with which groups becomes central to any movement’s strategy. The literature of social movements suggests that the prudent choice of frames, and the ability to effectively contest the opposition’s frames, lie at the heart of successful policy advocacy. A more extensive description of strategic frame analysis can be garnered at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

While strategic frame analysis brings new methods to bear on social issues, this perspective only confirms something that advocates have known for years: communications is among our most powerful strategic tools. Through communications we inspire people to join our efforts, convince policymakers, foundations and other leaders to prioritize our issues, and urge the media to accord it public attention. Every choice of word, metaphor, visual, or statistic conveys meaning, affecting the way these critical audiences will think about our issues, what images will come to mind and what solutions will be judged appropriate to the problem. Communications defines the problem, sets the parameters of the debate, and determines who will be heard, and who will be marginalized. Choices in the way we frame rural issues in general and such particular proposals as revising farm subsidies, increasing availability of broadband, improving access to health care or enhancing entrepreneurial activities in rural America must be made carefully and systematically to create the powerful communications necessary to ensure that the public can readily grasp the rationale behind these recommendations.

Doing this requires a base of research that probes beneath visible public opinion to determine why people think the way they do. This research must help communications directors choose wisely between competing options on the basis of empirical evidence. Only in this way can rural proponents feel secure that their individual communications tactics are accruing value to the larger goal of advancing public attitudes to rural issues and public support for meaningful policy solutions.

Working from this perspective, the FrameWorks research was initially designed to explore the following questions:

- How does the public think about rural issues?
- Are there dominant frames 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?
- What is the public discourse on the issue? And how is this discourse influenced by the way media frames the issue?
- How can rural issues be reframed to evoke a different way of thinking, one that illuminates a broader range of alternative programs and policy choices, and makes these both salient and sensible?

Building on Earlier Research

Prior to our engagement in rural issues, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation had commissioned a series of studies from leading opinion analysts, all of which are posted at www.wkkf.org; we include the Foundation's description of each of these reports below:

[Media Coverage of Rural America](#) (S. Robert Lichter, Daniel Amundson, Linda S. Lichter/Center for Media and Public Affairs, December 1, 2002) analyzes the content and framing of a sample of news coverage that dealt with life in rural America from January 1 to June 30, 2002 in major print outlets and all morning and evening television newscasts. Crime and land use issues dominated the news, with little news time devoted to such substantive issues as health, education and the environment. Note that this report was

updated in March 2005, and is addressed in subsequent sections of this Message Memo and is referred to in this memo as CMPA II).

Perceptions of Rural America (Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, 2002), is based on 242 in-depth interviews of rural, urban, and suburban Americans in several regions of the country. It shows that respondents hold strongly positive views about rural life in America, seeing it as the repository of traditional values, closely-knit communities and hard work. At the same time, these perceptions are tempered by the economic and social challenges facing these regions and the poor prognosis for their economic future. This means that perceptions of rural America are centered on a series of dichotomies - rural life represents traditional American values, but is behind the times; rural life is more relaxed and slower than city life, but harder and more grueling; rural life is friendly, but intolerant of outsiders and difference; and rural life is richer in community life, but epitomized by individuals struggling independently to make ends meet.

Perceptions of Rural America: Congressional Perspectives (Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, 2002) is a report based upon a bi-partisan survey of Congress and the Senate. Federal legislators see rural America as an important part of the nation's landscape. As the source of the nation's food supply, it plays a central role in the vitality of the country. As an incubator of American values, such as self-reliance, stewardship of the land and faith, it represents an important source of American tradition. These are views held by Democrats and Republicans alike and are largely independent of the constituency they represent.

Perceptions of Rural America: National State Legislators Survey (Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, undated) is a report based on a survey conducted among 1030 of the nation's 7,000 state legislators. Even though the findings show a broad consensus among state legislators on the problems and policy solutions for rural America, budget woes and more pressing priorities may require state legislative action on rural issues to take a back seat.

Election 2002: Rural Voters and Rural Issues Executive Summary (Greenberg, McInturff and Clark, 2003) includes key findings from an analysis of rural voters and rural voting patterns. The analysis specifically focuses on post-election research conducted by both firms with actual 2002 voters, plus a look at previous national post-election data from 1998 and 2000.

These researchers asserted a set of observations and testable propositions that were further explored in the FrameWorks research:

- That rural America is strongly associated with agriculture and must lose this association in order for ordinary people to appreciate the real challenges facing rural areas, from child care to transportation
- That, by portraying rural areas as places of innovation, Americans will be able to overcome their associations with rural backwardness
- That, by demonstrating that rural areas are places of history and culture, Americans will see rural areas as precious assets to be preserved and valued
- That, by identifying rural areas as places of diversity (arts and crafts, regional variety, etc.), they will shed their impression of rural America as narrow and monolithic

The FrameWorks Research Base

To answer these questions, and other questions that arise from the perspective of strategic frame analysis, the FrameWorks research team published the results of a series of studies conducted in 2001 and 2002, available at www.frameworksinstitute.org. Subsequent references to these reports are indicated in parentheses:

- Cognitive elicitations, or one-on-one semi-structured interviews with 30 urban, suburban and rural residents in Maryland, Colorado and Illinois, resulting in the report, “The Agrarian Myth Revisited,” Cultural Logic/FrameWorks Institute, October 2003 (CL I)
- Seven focus groups with urban/suburban and rural influentials in New Hampshire (3), Arkansas (2) and New Mexico (2), resulting in the report, “Perceptions and Misperceptions: An Analysis of Qualitative Research Exploring Views of Rural America, Public Knowledge/FrameWorks Institute, November 2003 (PK I).
- Three additional focus groups with urban/suburban and rural influentials in Illinois, resulting in the report “Connection, Cause and Character: An Analysis of Qualitative Research Exploring Views of Rural America,” Public Knowledge/FrameWorks Institute, June 2004 (PK II)
- Development of a series of candidate “simplifying models” to communicate various aspects of the rural story, and subsequent testing of these models via telephone interviews with a diverse sample of fifty urban/rural and suburban subjects, located primarily in the Mid-Atlantic, New York and New Jersey, and California, resulting in the preliminary report “Simplifying Rural Issues: Findings from Cognitive Analysis and Phone Interviews,” Cultural Logic/FrameWorks Institute, August 2004, and in a subsequent report scheduled for publication in fall 2005 (CL II and CL III, respectively).
- A national survey of Americans’ reactions to a series of “primes” and other experimental cues, designed to test the impact of frames on attitudes and policy preferences, resulting in the report, “Connecting the Country to the Rest of the

Country: An Analysis of A Priming Survey Exploring Views of Rural America,
Public Knowledge/FrameWorks Institute, September 2004 (PKIII).

It is on the basis of this combined body of work that FrameWorks researchers have developed the following analysis and related recommendations for improving public communications on early child development and the cluster of issues that comprise it – from school readiness and pre-K to maternal and child health and economic support for families. This MessageMemo is based on an earlier version posted following the initial round of research and has been updated to incorporate the newer findings.

While we begin with a selective review of key highlights from the reports, we strongly encourage readers to review the full body of research that informs this Memo, posted on the FrameWorks website (www.frameworksinstitute.org).

Situation Analysis

Q: “How do people in rural areas make a living?”
A: “Beats the heck out of me. If they don’t’ farm, I have no idea.”
Urban IL male elicitation informant

Looking across the research reports, we arrive at a series of nine core observations which are especially important to the reframing task:

1. *INVISIBLE.* The paucity of substantive news coverage of rural areas and issues leaves most Americans with a sketchy sense of “rural” reality.
2. *STEREOTYPED.* Rural Utopia and Rural Dystopia are strong, available and harmful default stereotypes of rural areas.
3. *WORTHY BUT DIFFERENT.* Undermining these stereotypes does not require proof of worthiness, or establishing more “likeability” for rural residents, but rather more similarity in situation to other citizens. This entails contesting the dominant frames by replacing them with more powerful explanatory models of interconnection.
4. *DISTRACTIONS.* While other frames exist, they may not be as powerful nor their consequences as important for advocates in avoiding strategic mis-steps; addressing them explicitly may be a distraction from more important frame challenges.
5. *BIG PICTURE THINKING.* A far less available, but more helpful way of thinking takes a “Big Picture” View, in which rural areas are part of systems that affect urban and suburban areas as well.
6. *PROBLEM DEFINITION.* Without a broader view, few Americans can explain why

rural areas might be struggling; they lack a foundation as well as specific information that would allow them to appreciate how national policies negatively impact rural areas.

7. *CHANGE. Problematically, most “solutions” are devalued because change is perceived, by definition, as the cause of rural problems.*
8. *CONSENSUS. Rural, suburban and urban dwellers are more alike than different in their understanding of rural issues and their appraisal of solutions.*
9. *NEW UNDERSTANDINGS. For people to think more productively about rural America, they need a new conceptual tool – a mental image that helps them make sense of rural problems and solutions in a new and concrete way. An effective “simplifying model” puts people in a more practical and constructive mode when thinking about the issue.*

In the following section, we further develop these points and explain the research that supports them. In the final section of this MessageMemo, we review advocates’ past attempts to reframe perceptions of rural America, and compare the probable consequences of those strategies with the FrameWorks research findings, concluding with specific reframing recommendations.

Findings from the Research

**“Duct tape and wire – keeps (rural) America going.”
New Mexico focus group informant**

INVISIBLE

The paucity of substantive news coverage of rural areas and issues leaves most Americans with a sketchy sense of “rural” reality.

For the regular TV viewer, rural America was invisible, noted the Center for Media and Public Affairs in its updated content analysis, comparing 2002 to 2004 rural coverage. National media audiences were treated to “an average of fewer than two stories per week on all three broadcast network morning and evening news shows combined.” (CMPA II:2).

Substantive issues were rarely covered: economic and employment issues accounted for only 13 percent of all stories in both years, political issues declined slightly in the 2004 election year underscoring the irrelevance of policies on rural areas, while health and education accounted for five percent each of issue discussions. In sum, “As portrayed in the media, rural America is a nice place to visit, but you wouldn’t learn enough to decide whether you wanted to live there.” (CMPA I:iii)

Indeed, the very definition of rural remains sketchy. The Center notes that “‘Rural’ was frequently used as a kind of boutique term to conjure up an idyllic vision, rather than as a mark of real places that have a rural lifestyle or derive their income from rural activities....thus, ‘rural’ was often defined negatively, either in terms of what it is not or what it might become. (CMPA I: 51-52). “The ‘world’ of rural America,” according to these news

reports, “was often presented by the media as a vestige of the past, a place being buffeted by its close encounters with the physical and cultural mainstream of contemporary urban society. It was not associated with agriculture so much as open space and the real or imagined qualities of small town living.” (CMPA I:53) In this context, “rural” was less about agriculture than it was about encroachment, as the dominant news story again focused on how to preserve rural or semi-rural areas from encroaching development. And, when substantive issues were covered, they reflected this meta-frame: “as with land use issues, drug use was often portrayed as a threat to traditional rural values or lifestyles.” (CMPA I:12).

The term ‘rural’ is used as a proxy for values, not as a place or people experiencing issues similar to others in America. These researchers conclude that “the cultural narratives behind the world ‘rural’ trigger images of a simpler, slower, safer existence as well as a hardscrabble struggle in a harsh environment. The ideas of tightly-knit communities and close family life coexist with those of rugged individualism and the freedom of the frontier. Rural pastoralism suggests a more natural way of living, while rural isolation can suggest backwardness or intolerance, and by representing the opposite of ‘urban,’ the term ‘rural’ signifies both escape and something to be escaped from. There can be little doubt that American mass media have played a significant role in building and decorating these frames, which are constantly fed by the influence of this pop culture diet, from *The Waltons* to the *Dukes of Hazzard*.” (CMPAI:1)

From framing research we would expect that, when news accounts of rural issues are sketchy or merely suggestive, most Americans will fall back upon residual narratives and stereotypes shaped over time by what media scholar George Gerbner once termed the “drip drip” of media and popular culture.

STEREOTYPED

Rural Utopia and Rural Dystopia are strong, available and harmful default stereotypes of rural areas.

Interviews with ordinary people conducted for *FrameWorks* by Cultural Logic bear out these predictions of the “pictures in people’s heads” triggered by the idea of rural America. Cultural Logic identifies two dominant and chronically accessible models of rural America (CL I:3):

- *Rural Utopia assumes that rural people are hard-working, virtuous, simple, and have little money. Although it has the advantage of placing a high value on rural regions and people, it has a number of unproductive entailments for advocates.*
- *Rural Dystopia describes a negative and largely unfixable situation, which is believed to be (partly) due to the inherent nature of the rural inhabitants themselves. It is associated with labels such as Deep South, Appalachia, and Indian Reservations.*

As Rural Utopia is by far the more dominant of the two models, Cultural Logic devoted time in its report to chronicling the numerous distorting effects that are the result of reasoning from this model, from which we choose selectively below, condense and interpret:

- Life is simple

Example: *I'm thinking in a rural neighborhood, life is much simpler... [It's not about] the latest color of eyeshadow that came out, which is what a city need is, or, in suburbia it's that wine that you need for dinner. I mean, not that not that people in rural neighborhoods are light-years behind anybody else, I mean, but there's probably a smaller selection, so their needs are probably more basic... I'm not saying that as a put-down, I think that's something people need to revert back to. I'm all for it. You know? Eliminate all the 20 different products of one thing, you know, we don't need it. [suburban IL woman]*

Consequences: Policies and programs are a poor fit with this “Small Picture” view of rural life, as they would inevitably complicate and destroy the very virtues that define the rural way.

- Poverty is a virtue, or not a rural problem

Examples:

“Well, I'd rather be poor in the country than I would in the city. I feel very sorry for people that have very bad incomes and live in the city. I really don't know what, how they manage. Whereas in the country, you can just go outside and smell the grass and..I really don't have much feeling of how they cope with it. I feel terribly sorry for them and I think it's very sad. [rural CO woman]

Q: Do you think there tends to be more poverty in rural parts of the country or more in the cities?

A: I think more in the cities, like out here [in suburban Colorado], I don't really see many homeless people, but like in the city, there's tons of them.

Q: Okay. But in rural areas you figure people probably aren't so poor?

A: Or they go to the city. I don't know. Like they might be struggling, but I mean they're not like to the verge of poverty, I guess. [suburban CO woman]

Consequences: First, rural life has always been hard, so poverty is part of the definition. It is, therefore, ennobling, not degrading. But, at the same time, “poverty” does not look or feel like its rural manifestation; rather, “poverty” is associated with urban areas and peoples. This confusion effectively makes poverty, and any effort to address or reduce it through programs or policies, a “bad fit” with the idea of rural.

- We take care of ourselves

Example:

Q: Do you think that/would you say that rural parts of the country need help these days?

A: Well, you do in a certain sense, but not any more than the city. I don't think we really need as much help as the city, because they learn to live more on what they have. [rural MD man]

Consequences: There is a rural code of ethics observable in the elicitations and in the focus groups that is composed of the following beliefs: (1) rural people (should) do whatever they can for themselves; (2) when things get tough, rural people sacrifice and do with less, (3) when necessary, rural people help their friends, families and neighbors, (4) only truly dysfunctional people would need outside help, and therefore, (5) intervention is neither respectful nor welcomed.

- They chose this lifestyle

Examples:

“I don’t think farmers are being exploited, because it’s a choice. They’ve chosen to do that as where their passion is or how they want to live.” [suburban IL man]

“If you don’t like being in the country, why don’t you go somewhere else?” [urban informant]

Consequences: If rural is perceived as a choice of locale, then the solution to attendant problems is, logically, to move. Fuelled by the sense of American mobility, as Cultural Logic points out, this trope reduces remedial rural policies to lifestyle choices.

The Rural Dystopia model is available to urban, suburban and rural residents, notes Cultural Logic (CL I:4) but “is evoked less often and exerts less effect on most people’s thinking.” This was further confirmed by the relative paucity of this frame in media coverage. Nevertheless, it lurks at the margins of thought, aided and abetted by jokes, folk tales and popular culture. Two closely-related examples of this model are as follows:

- It’s A Culture of “Throw-Aways”

Example: This example comes from a hit song by country singer Dierks Bentley:

*“When a mountain of a man with a "born to kill" tattoo
Tried to cut in, I knocked out his front tooth
We ran outside hood-slidin' like Bo Duke
What was I thinkin'”*

Consequences: This stereotypical framing further distances ordinary people from their rural counterparts, and establishes “Otherness,” making rural people a culture apart and incapable or unwilling to assimilate.

- It’s Backward.

Example: *“I’ve done some traveling in the South and there the real poverty is devastating. I mean people live in shacks I’ve driven past that looks like if you sneezed it would fall down. Not quite as bad a place as like India, but...”[urban CO male]*

Consequences: If rural areas are “behind the time,” then the way to improve them is to bring them into the modern world. That solution will, inevitably, mean leaving behind or losing some people, values and characteristics that are also good. But, people reason, modernization is necessary and probably inevitable, especially in the new global environment.

WORTHY BUT DIFFERENT

Undermining these stereotypes does not require proof of worthiness, or establishing more “likeability” for rural residents, but rather more similarity in situation to other citizens. This entails contesting the dominant frames by replacing them with more powerful explanatory models of interconnection.

Ironically, one of the principle problems in the dominant Rural Utopia frame is the fact that rural people are seen as almost heroic, the exemplars of traditional values. Respect, then, is defined as letting these self-sufficient and noble people get on with the business of rural life, unfettered by the (presumed) unwelcome interference of strangers and outsiders who would only destroy their culture.

While FrameWorks often counsels that focusing on individuals leads to assessments of unworthiness, by focusing on rural individuals, one runs a different but equally unproductive risk. As noted in the media content analysis, rural stories about individuals often turn on tales of eccentricities, in which the rural person is considered the “product” of an insular environment (see Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* for roots of this frame in literature). Rural people, then, are presumed to be inherently different from other people, and not amenable to the same programs or policies. Consider an assessment of the desirability of mental health programs or employment counseling within this context. Both are likely to presume that rural people would find these programs unwelcome, intrusive or inappropriate.

In sum, it is precisely the similarity of rural people to others, their commonality, that is required as part of the reframe. By dwelling on their worthiness, one further cues the Rural Utopian myth with its related tale of the virtuous and self-sufficient rural citizen. By focusing on distinctive attributes, one may inadvertently cue up a Rural Dystopia frame in which the rural resident is not like the rest of us and must be left to the indigenous influences of an alien culture. But ordinariness is a hard story to tell, especially when it relies on personal attributes, and thus the centrally important ideas of connection and similarity require other narrative devices to get rural areas, issues and residents to resemble the rest of the country.

Focusing on individuals may prove less effective than focusing on effective groups of citizens. If, as has been famously argued, identity is a process, it may well be that rural identity is entirely defined by the process of encroachment. Rural “means” that area and people choked off from the mainstream and threatened by the inevitability of change. Rural, then, is a kind of anti-modernism. As Cultural Logic points out (CL I:25), “The Rural Utopia model frames rural life as life in a Village.” While Rural Dystopia is often about the backwardness that Village life and its insularity confer, it is also often about the dysfunctionality of the Village itself, compared to the modern world. That point is an easy one to make, as the Center for Media and Public Affairs points out in its content analysis: “TV news just wasn’t interested in civic life in rural America.” (CMPA I: 13).

This is an important nuance with respect to the Rural Dystopia model. While it may be tempting for advocates to want to concentrate on redeeming rural residents from the stereotypes of “trailer trash” and “inbred hillbillies,” the deeper and more pernicious impact of the model may, in fact, be its ability to disempower and delegitimize local leaders who are trying to direct change in positive directions. In this sense, Rural Dystopia is just as much about dysfunctionality of the Village as it is of individual Villagers. The way to address this

problem is not by parading worthy Villagers, but rather by demonstrating the positive change (solutions) that functional rural citizens are able to make when empowered and supported by public policies.

There is a caution to be added to this direction, however, in that care must be taken not to inadvertently reinforce the notion that rural people can and should solve their own problems without outside interference. This is further addressed in sections below.

DISTRACTIONS

**“I see rural areas as vacation spots for me.”
Urban IL focus group informant**

While other frames exist, they may not be as powerful nor as important in directing public thinking as previously thought. While understanding their consequences is important for advocates in avoiding strategic mis-steps, addressing them explicitly may be a distraction from more important frame challenges.

Neither the media content analyses nor the cognitive elicitations found people’s associations between rural and agriculture to be especially strong or problematic. “It was not associated with agriculture or countryside so much as empty space and the real or imagined qualities of small town living,” noted the Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA II:i). “In this sense,” they conclude, “rural life was often presented positively but defined negatively – not in terms of what it is, but what it has ceased to be or what it may become.”

Rather, it is the multi-faceted association with Rural Utopia that gets in the way of clear thinking. As Public Knowledge points out in its report on the initial round of focus groups, “the image that came up most frequently across all the focus groups was an image of serenity, peacefulness, and a lack of stress.” (PK I:5). And closely related was the impression of beauty. While it might prove tempting to rural advocates to “talk back” to the mistaken impression that rural America is dominated by the family farm, in an effort to move the public conversation in more productive and realistic directions, that attempt is almost certainly likely to bear little fruit. As FrameWorks has demonstrated on numerous issues (see E-Zine #30 at www.frameworksinstitute.org), if the facts don’t fit the frame, it is the facts that are rejected, not the frames. People will find a way to “have their cake and eat it too,” holding on to their impressions of beauty and serenity even when the image of the family farm has been contested.

Building on earlier research, Public Knowledge found the idea of “ingenuity” initially appealing to focus group informants as a way to describe rural inhabitants, but it soon became clear that the idea is problematic. “While a conversation about innovation and ingenuity creates a positive image of rural America, it may also reinforce the notion that rural America should take care of itself. ‘They have learned to be self sufficient in their own way,’ a man from rural Arkansas described. ‘They’ve developed their own culture, and their own ways of life to exist. And they’re not relying on the outside world. They’re taking care of it right there within their own community, even so much as relying on talents from other people. That makes them closer and you know a tighter knit group of people.’” (PK I: 7) In short, the “ingenuity

frame” backfires by its facile connection to self-reliance. That said, the idea of problem-solving, and solutions, which is inherent in the Ingenuity Frame, gets closer to an important element in the reframing narrative (see discussion below).

Diversity, another recommendation from the earlier phase of research, was immediately rejected by our informants. “To most Americans,” Public Knowledge concludes, ‘diversity’ means racial and cultural diversity. While rural communities across the country may reflect a mix of races and cultures, most focus group respondents believe that individual rural communities tend to be very homogeneous. If there is diversity, they believe it is due to migrant workers or urban flight.” (PKI:8)

The recommendation to frame rural areas as places of history and culture proves an easy sell. It captures people’s sense of the beauty and traditions associated with rural places. “Problematically, emphasizing the history and culture of rural areas may not advance a public policy conversation,” concludes Public Knowledge . “At best, it triggers a sense of loss and a desire to protect and preserve. ‘I experience a loss of a culture,’ a woman from rural New Hampshire shared. ‘I remember when I moved here in the late 60's. There were cows everywhere... I feel that the North Country culture is pretty eroded and that chain is being broken as our children feel the need to move on.’ However, Public Knowledge concludes, “The Protection Frame, is not one of the more effective approaches to building policy support.”(PK I: 9).

Both the “places of history and culture” and the Protection Frame lead people to adopt what we have termed a “Museum Mindset,” in which a small subset of the real rural world is maintained for use by tourists or retirees who can now populate the rural landscape and “play at” rural settings. Once in this mindset, “Saving the Family Farm” or even “Saving the Small Town” becomes analogous to “Save the Whales” with all the focus on the object of desire, and no attention to the context or ecology that must also be preserved in order for that object to survive in any meaningful way.

In sum, many of the frames in play only serve to foreground and reinforce aspects of the dominant frame that serve to obscure any solutions put forward by rural advocates. Put simply, the frame dance can be thought of as follows:

Consequences of the Frames in Use

Foreground	Conclusion
Simplicity/beauty	Don’t spoil it
Self-sufficiency	Don’t interfere
Choice	Move
Protection (places of history and culture)	Museum mindset (keep an exemplar)
(Invisible) poverty, scarcity, sacrifice	The way it’s always been, supposed to be
Ingenuity	They’ll figure it out

BIG PICTURE THINKING

A far less available, but more helpful way of thinking takes a “Big Picture” View, in which rural areas are part of systems that affect urban and suburban areas as well.

Across the research, the essential frame challenge that emerges is the establishment of a vivid sense of rural systems. And it is this interdependent and interconnected sense of rural areas and issues that often characterizes the difference between the way rural informants see the world and the way others do. As Cultural Logic explains (CL I:5),

“A simple fact ignored by many urban and suburban Americans is that rural areas include small towns and many different kinds of jobs, and interconnections between people in cities and the country. When one shifts to this cognitive perspective, it becomes much easier to understand both causes of, and solutions to, problems that face rural America. What even fewer of these Americans recognize is that, thanks to the disintegration of the agrarian economy and the family farm, rural life is increasingly about disconnection, decline and the lack of a reliable economic base. A realistic view of rural America – the Wal-Mart reality – includes the domination of retail and other commercial service jobs, a lack of facilities and services, and increasing division between the locals interested in finding a way out of rural economic traps, and urban refugees buying their way into the rural landscape.”

One of the primary goals of communications, Cultural Logic speculated early in the research process, should be to connect rural issues and areas to the rest of the country. How to do this, however, steering between the shoals of Rural Utopia and Rural Dystopia, proved harder than expected. As Public Knowledge acknowledges (PK I:2), “(The) first phase of research determined that the true barriers in public perception were more complicated than earlier experience had suggested. The problem was not negative stereotypes about rural people. In fact, positive perceptions of rural America far outweigh negative perceptions. The solution was not to provide new factual information about the size and scope of rural America. The public’s assumption that progress is inevitable trumps any short term impact of new factual information about the size of rural areas or the number of people who live in rural America. Even the public’s desire to protect a valued way of life, a life upon which this country was founded, was not sufficient to enlist committed support for a wide range of rural policies.”

Three early stories, tested in focus groups, had begun to suggest the formula for conveying the Rural Systems Frame. These stories emphasized key elements:

- Connection – Reminding people that the rest of us rely on rural areas and that our mutual well-being depends upon all parts of the country being in good shape
- Empowerment – Making visible the role of rural citizens and making them powerful in working to affect change so that it benefits rural communities, rather than destroying them
- Outside forces – Connecting the actions of policymakers and policies to their effects on rural communities so that people can understand cause and effect, and emphasizing alternative policies or solutions and their probable impacts

Together, these elements of a Rural Systems frame began to move rural, urban and suburban informants toward a greater appreciation for policies that would benefit the real residents affected by rural economies and not merely preserve quaint villages for future tourists.

PROBLEM DEFINITION

Without a broader view, few Americans can explain why rural areas might be struggling; they lack a foundation as well as specific information that would allow them to appreciate how national policies negatively impact rural areas.

It is tempting to tap into people's concern about the economy or the health care system to try to establish the connections and similarities identified as core frame themes. A cautionary tale arises from the second round of focus groups, in which FrameWorks tested a National Economy Frame to try to explain the interconnections between rural and other areas. As Public Knowledge explains, "Across geographies, the National Economy Frame mobilizes focus group participants' concerns about the country's economic problems. However, the nation's economic problems are viewed as so severe that the task seems overwhelming. Furthermore, since urban and suburban residents know few stories about the causes of economic problems in rural areas, it is difficult for them to transfer their high level of concern about the national economy to the specific solutions needed in rural economies." (2:p4)

Similarly, assigning responsibility to policymakers for solutions that help lift rural communities can also be a daunting challenge. FrameWorks put forward a Community Frame, in which discussed rural policies through the lens of community needs and community action, ending with a successful impact. The result was that "the community frame effectively connects the interests of urban, suburban and rural residents," explains Public Knowledge. "It causes people in metropolitan areas to understand why they should care about rural America. Furthermore, the highlighted success story conveys that positive change can happen and that rural people are capable. However, the success story inadvertently suggests that communities can make these changes alone, implying that there is little need for government solutions." (PK II:12)

Instead of facts, Cultural Logic suggests using causal sequences, defined as "a clear and concrete explanation of the causes of a problem, including the mechanism by which the problem is created. Causal sequences include 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, that gives people the sense that they grasp the issue.¹"

In the final round of focus groups, FrameWorks told simple causal stories that characterized rural areas and small towns as systems that worked well until outside forces broke those systems. "For example," Public Knowledge explains, "members of the public already understand the effect of foreign trade policy on manufacturing jobs, so they can readily accept the rural impact of trade policy. Since they already believe government is ineffective, the role of federal policy in causing rural problems is an easy story for people to learn. And since members of the public know the danger of corporate monopolies and the impact of the profit motive on product quality, they immediately understand why family farmers are

¹ For more on causal sequences related to rural issues, see Cultural Logic's E-Zine "Strengthening Advocacy by Explaining Causal Sequences," at <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/products/issue31framing.shtml>.

preferable to agribusiness. All of these stories help to position rural communities as functioning systems that are being pressured by outside forces.”

Embedded in the kinds of explanations that have so far proven most effective is a level one value of "Responsible Management" - a very different value from Preservation or Fairness, for example. The causal explanations that help nonrural residents grasp rural problems in a more helpful way also help position them as people who can make a difference, and tap into a shared American value of taking responsibility for fixing problems. Rather than positioning rural America as a place that needs charity or should be admired, the Responsible Manager stance treats it as a place, like the rest of the country, where particular problems require particular solutions.

Note, by the way, that this level one message applies to rural residents, too - they are most helpfully seen (and see themselves) not as mere "victims," but as responsible agents of positive change.

CHANGE

Problematically, most “solutions” are devalued because change is perceived, by definition, as the cause of rural problems.

There is a pernicious Catch 22 in Americans’ thinking about rural problems and solutions. It goes something like this:

- The central problem affecting rural America (read Rural Utopia) is the encroachment of outside forces on rural areas and values
- Change is, therefore, the driving and negative force behind rural decay
- Rural people are against change
- But change is inevitable
- So the practical response to change is preservation (Museum Mindset) of some parts of rural America
- The respectful outsider leaves the rest of rural America to rural people

The focus groups returned again and again to this central conundrum. “While the loss of rural places may be regrettable,” observes Public Knowledge, “many urban residents believe that change is inevitable. ‘I drove through Merrimack the other day and there are all kinds of new buildings,’ a Manchester woman reported. ‘They’re doing a new school. Do the people have a choice? The people living in Merrimack, do they want it to be another Nashua? Well it is whether they wanted it or not.’”(PK I:10)

‘In discussion,’ notes Public Knowledge, ‘rural people are more likely than urban people to explain the causes of problems. For example, a woman from rural New Hampshire discussed the effect of urban flight on housing prices. ‘I think we are seeing the people moving up from Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island at a rapid pace... the prices of our homes have gotten out of sight. I thought at one time I would sell my two-story home and get a one-story as I got older and prepare for retirement. I can’t see that happening now.’ Another woman from rural New Hampshire tied the growth of agribusiness to the deteriorating environment: ‘Just complete and utter contempt for our environment. And 100 years from now I’m horrified to think how many species you’ll only see in a zoo. Things like local farms will all be huge

enterprises, Agri-Mart and all these people that sponsor PBS will be running huge, huge farm operations.” (PK I: 11)

On the other hand, Public Knowledge acknowledges, ‘if problems can be addressed, and change is not inevitable, then it is up to the people who live in rural areas to fix their own problems. This effectively relieves non-rural citizens of responsibility. “I believe in self-determination and people that are living in rural areas have to decide,’ stated an Albuquerque woman. ‘They are there because they choose to,’ an Albuquerque woman remarked. ‘They could move. Nobody is forcing them to live there.’ Rural residents who state this viewpoint are not trying to deflect responsibility; rather, they are empowering themselves to take control. ‘The community should be responsible for it,’ remarked a man from rural Arkansas. ‘Those that live in the community. You’ve got to take care of your own.’ ‘The people,’ stated a man from rural New Hampshire. ‘They have to vote for the right representatives.’” (PK I: 11)

We have quoted from the focus group analysis at length because it raises two points that are fundamental to the reframing challenge:

- Rural advocates and the solutions they put forward must position change as a positive factor, and rural people as not unilaterally against change; without a change-orientation, there can be no substantive discussion of solutions, and
- The question of responsibility – who made and who gets to fix the problem – must be addressed explicitly if rural people are not to be perceived as either buffeted by fate or responsible for their own situations.

CONSENSUS

Rural, suburban and urban dwellers are more alike than different in their understanding of rural issues and their appraisal of solutions.

Across the research, FrameWorks collaborators found more similarities in perspective than dissimilarities. As Cultural Logic noted, rural residents held many of the same stereotypes about rural issues and people as did others – even when, on some level, they know better:

Q: So when you think about poverty in America, would you associate that more with cities or with the country?

A: I think the cities. I think I hear more about it in the cities, the large cities. Although I take stuff to the mission down here [in a small Colorado town] and I know there’s plenty of poor people down there...I mean the inner city, that’s where to me, I think you have more poverty. [rural CO woman]

The advantage that rural citizens have, however, in approaching these issues is that their greater familiarity with rural systems allows them a deeper understanding of *why* rural areas are struggling, *how* external policies contribute to their problems and constrain their ability to resolve problems, and *what* impact this might have on the rest of the country.

The quantitative research added another dimension to our understanding of who is predisposed to support rural issues and who can be moved to do so, with what arguments.

Public Knowledge offers insightful analyses of the commonalities and differences among audiences:

“ The central distinction between world views is not based upon where one lives. Rather, the central consideration appears to be one’s perceptions of the appropriate role for collective action versus perceptions of the responsibility of individual communities in creating their own success or failure.

Throughout the survey, certain demographic groups consistently: support prioritizing the needs of urban and rural areas, see responsibility at all levels of government, rate the importance of policies highly, and agree with the values of interdependence and collective action. These core audiences include Democrats, women, minority respondents and those with less education. An opposing world view is held among Republicans, men, white respondents and those with more education. These audiences are less likely to prioritize the needs of any geographic area, rate all policies as less important, and place primary responsibility on local governments in rural areas to solve the problems facing these communities.

The challenge for communicators, this survey analyst concludes, is neither to improve the public’s views of rural people nor develop a public fondness for Rural America. Rather, building public will for policy change on behalf of Rural America will require a communications frame that illuminates the role of policy decisions in creating rural problems and in addressing rural concerns, and that builds a sense of geographic interdependence to connect all people to these issues, wherever they live. (PK III:1)”

That said, the two successful reframes tested in the survey research achieved different outcomes with different groups (PK III: 2):

The
Fairness
Frame

The Fairness Frame

In this country, we believe that all Americans should have the same opportunities. But the reality is that people in small towns and rural places are not enjoying the same benefits as the rest of the nation. In fact, nearly all of the poorest counties in the nation are in rural America, and the divide between urban and rural prosperity is becoming greater. This happens

The Interdependence Frame

In this country, we believe that what affects Americans in one part of the nation affects us all and that we will only succeed when all parts of the nation are in good shape. We have a unique opportunity to move ahead as a country through creating good jobs and economic opportunity, improving education, reforming healthcare, and strengthening communities. Indicators of well-being suggest that small towns and rural places are breaking down and the effect is spreading to the well-being of the nation as a whole. This is happening because the efforts that enhance a community’s well-being, like economic development, availability of health care programs, and opportunities for a good education, have disproportionately benefited metropolitan areas, which results in cutting rural places off from opportunities. We can prevent further damage by working together to reconnect the skills and resources that exist in the nation’s heartland, which will then reverberate throughout the nation.

me -- which describes how rural areas struggle because they are not given a fair share of the nation's resources, so leveling the playing field is the solution – is more effective with Democrats, minorities, Southerners and men. People exposed to this frame showed the strongest overall support for rural *policies* of the frames tested.

The Interdependence Frame – which emphasizes that the nation is one entity that is being affected by declining rural areas, so reconnecting rural areas would benefit the nation as a whole – is more effective with Independents, white respondents, and younger men.

Both frames increase support among younger women and those who live in rural areas. Both frames increase the priority of rural areas across the population. Both frames increase perceived responsibility for government. Both policies lift support for important rural policies. Both frames can be used to support each other, as they work well in tandem, making the selection between them somewhat of a moot point.

Importantly, the Fairness Frame is not a Disparities Frame, which had not tested well in the qualitative research. The critical distinction here is that the Fairness Frame is not about sympathy, nor does it pit one group against another in a zero-sum game. The Fairness Frame explains how policies are negatively affecting one region and elevates practical solutions that would restore equanimity. It also draws considerably from values of opportunity for all and progress.

Urban, Suburban and Rural Audiences

In a different analysis of the data², support for rural policy varied by geographic location in some interesting and potentially useful ways. In the fairness frame, rural and urban respondents supported the rural agenda in almost identical numbers.

When rural and suburban groups were compared, however, significant differences did appear in their levels of support for the rural agenda in the fairness frame but not in the interdependence frame. Fairness may have cued up an “us versus them” way of thinking that created less support of suburban audiences for rural policy choices. For advocates designing communications efforts to reach suburban audiences, messages should stress interdependence over fairness.

Urban people, exposed to the interdependence frame, demonstrated significantly less support for the rural policy agenda than did rural people; however, they did so in the Control situation as well, where they got no frame stimulus. So, while some may choose to dial back interdependence messages in communications which require the support of urban people, weaving Fairness and Interdependence together in mass media situations that cross groups may prove an effective option. The Interdependence frame did not create a significant difference in the level of support for the rural agenda between rural and suburban people, meaning that it is a useful persuasive message for campaigns directed at suburban people.

² Webb, A. (2005). Reframing Rural America. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI

For rural advocates, these findings provide interesting food for thought as we determine the role of rural, urban and suburban voters in our policy campaigns. Rural people not surprisingly had a higher level of support for the rural agenda than their suburban and urban counterparts. Urban and suburban people, however, did support the rural agenda differently under the various frames, useful information in the creation of specific communications strategies. At the same time, it may be helpful to think of these frames less as competitive strategies and more as congruent messages that can be used in mass media appeals to attract the broadest coalitions and most diverse audiences.

It is the FrameWorks researchers' conclusion, based on the preponderance of evidence across research methods, that an opportunity does exist to reframe rural America, the issues that confront it, and the solutions that would benefit it by elevating a unified message. But doing that will require a new song sheet in the rural advocacy playbook, one that plays to larger ideas that reconnect rural with the rest of the country and explains this central idea using values, causal sequences, models and other frame elements.

NEW UNDERSTANDINGS

One element of the frame – the Simplifying Model – requires further elaboration.

Simplifying models are a kind of metaphorical frame that both capture the essence of a scientific concept, and have a high capacity for spreading through a population. Numerous studies in the cognitive sciences have established that both the development and the learning of complex, abstract or technical concepts typically rely on analogies. An explanation that reduces a complex problem to a simple, concrete analogy or metaphor contributes to understanding by helping people organize information into a clear picture in their heads, including facts and ideas previously learned but not organized in a coherent way. Once this analogical picture has been formed, it becomes the basis for new reasoning about the topic. Better understanding also leads to an increase in engagement and motivation. For the past few years, Cultural Logic has been working to identify Simplifying Models for global warming, early child development, race, government and other fundamentally misunderstood concepts.

In approaching this task with respect to rural issues, Cultural Logic identified a set of goals that the model needed to contribute to the overall framing enterprise:

- To get rural back into the rest of the country
- To steer clear of Rural Utopia and Rural Dystopia
- To establish communality of interest among rural, urban and suburban residents
- To explain the source and impact of rural problems
- To help make solutions more explicit and concrete

To achieve these goals, simplifying models development focused on explanations that put rural differences into the background and emphasized the interconnected nature of rural and urban America, including problems that might be shared by both rural and (struggling) metro areas.

In particular, there were three directions tested:

- Rural areas as critical *parts* of national systems/structures
- The problems when rural and metro areas become *disconnected*
- Rural areas as *exceptions* to national patterns

The conceptual direction that performed best in testing treated rural areas as exceptions to general American patterns. These models focused on aspects of American society that are universally understood and even taken for granted, rather than taking the rural difference as the organizing principle for the discussion. This direction yielded our ultimate recommendations.

A focus on the *basic systems* that all Americans count on (communications, health care, etc.) ultimately helped people engage more productively and realistically with problems in rural areas. When people are given a tool that helps them grasp the *unequal distribution* of these systems in some areas vs. others, their thinking follows lines that lead to support for the kinds of changes recommended by advocates.

Example paragraph

The following paragraph illustrates the use of the explanatory model "Patchwork Effect," and was successful in testing:

Most economists are now worried about what they call the Patchwork Effect. This is a problem that is forcing families and businesses to abandon small towns and rural regions that should be vital parts of the economy. In rural areas, the network of basic services that our prosperity and quality of life depend on has never been developed - from transportation services to health care services, banking services, communication services, and so on. The Patchwork Effect is forcing people to leave towns and large areas that should be vital parts of the economy.

Core Proposition of the Model

The core proposition of the successful explanations was the following:

The unequal distribution of the basic systems and services all Americans depend on is making some (rural) regions of the US significantly less livable, and less economically viable.

Or, more schematically:

Missing systems/services → Unlivable communities → Economic decline

The most essential feature of this explanatory strategy is that it focuses on systems and structures whose importance *every* American can appreciate, such as transportation and health systems. It allows metro Americans to identify with rural Americans in ways they often don't, and the conceptual starting point is one that treats rural/metro differences as

secondary and manageable, rather than primary and fundamental. This approach also has two other important strengths:

- Since it focuses on systems and structures rather than individuals, it offers a "big picture," and suggests solutions related to policy and collective action.
- It is very compatible with the values of Fairness and Interdependence. (It is *unfair* that basic systems have been developed in some areas but not others, and the consequences are not confined to rural America.) The survey research conducted by the FrameWorks Institute for the "Talking Rural Issues" Project demonstrated that both Fairness and Interdependence are powerful values cues for promoting understanding and support of rural issues. The model aligns itself with these cues and helps make them more concrete.

Language and imagery

At the level of language and imagery, testing established that "Patchwork Effect" is an effective way of conveying the idea of unequal/spotty distribution of basic systems. This language offers a vivid picture that helps people grasp the idea of unequal distribution as well as potential unity.

The term Patchwork proved to be both memorable and effective. Importantly, there was *no suggestion in the research that the term Patchwork evoked homely images* of rural sewing circles etc.

The Reframing Challenge

The challenge – how to engage a broader constituency?

Advocates for rural America find themselves in a difficult position, but one not unfamiliar to advocates in other issue areas: Both the public and policymakers often seem indifferent, and slow progress on rural issues seems to result from low levels of motivation and engagement among those whose support would make progress possible.

As a result, smart and committed advocates on rural issues have consistently fallen into two tempting but counterproductive traps in their communications. These can be thought of as wide, deep ruts on either side of the narrow road that advocates must walk. In this part of the Message Memo, we explore these ruts that can derail communications, and the consequences of falling into them.

Rut #1: The bad news about rural America

Because rural advocates believe that Americans simply aren't aware of the difficulties faced by rural people (and to an extent the advocates are right), they often highlight these problems in their communications:

Empty deserted storefronts and abandoned family farms appear to tell the story of many rural communities.

Nearly one-fifth of all rural children are poor: rural poverty rates average ... about three percentage points higher than those in metro areas; and 189 of the 200 poorest counties are rural.

- *In fact, rural America is far poorer than metropolitan areas.*
 - *Of the 66 poorest counties in America, 59 are rural.*
 - *Close to 14 percent of all rural children live below the poverty level.*
 - *If you are African American or Hispanic, your chances of living in poverty are greater if you live in rural America than if you live in the inner city.*

- *Of the 250 poorest counties in the United States, 244 are rural.*
- *Rural households earn an average of 27 percent less than their metropolitan counterparts.*
- *The rural poverty rate is 21 percent higher than the metropolitan poverty rate.*
- *In 1996-98 the suicide rate for males over 15 years of age was nearly 80 percent higher in rural areas than in large metropolitan counties.*
- *Rural areas have about half the number of physicians per capita as urban areas.*
- *Drug use among young teens is significantly higher in rural than in urban America...*
- *Spending in rural school districts is 25 percent less per pupil than in metropolitan districts.*
- *Nearly 40 percent of the rural population does not have access to public transportation. More than half of the rural poor do not own automobiles.*

Some 1.8 million rural homes and apartments are moderately or severely substandard. More than 200,000 lack complete indoor plumbing... Nothing sends a message of deterioration and despair like dilapidated or vacant housing ...

The theory behind texts like these is that a startling picture of rural poverty and deprivation will wake up American voters and leaders, and spur progress on correcting this obviously unacceptable situation.

But there are serious problems with this approach, which is just as likely to disengage readers as to motivate them. First, it may simply confirm the “Rural Dystopia” model – rooted in negative images of uneducated country folk living ramshackle lives and so forth. In this common default way of understanding rural America (even among people who “know better” on some level), poverty and other problems are part of the natural and inevitable condition of rural life, and it is questionable whether others outside rural areas have any responsibility for fixing them, or whether they can (or should) be fixed at all.

In short, people’s indifference may not be due to ignorance about the problems, but due to well-established understandings (i.e. cognitive and cultural *models*) that seem to *explain* those problems. Furthermore, the Rural Dystopia model is so clear and vivid in people’s minds that once it is triggered this cognitive rut can take thinking down the wrong path, *even if people possess plenty of knowledge to the contrary*. Once the Rural Dystopia vision is

evoked, it sets up patterns of reasoning within which the solutions offered by advocates make little sense.

More generally, research conducted by Cultural Logic, the FrameWorks Institute and other partners has established repeatedly that the discussion of major problems such as the poverty of millions of people and whole regions is overwhelming and the opposite of motivating. Faced with apparently intractable problems, people are more likely to shut down than to get on board.

A further problem is that what advocates understand as bad news can sound to readers like good news:

Fewer than 15 percent [of rural households] receive any federal housing help. Though 22 percent of the elderly live in rural areas, just 15 percent of the assisted living beds are located there.

For many Americans, of course, federal housing help and assisted living beds sound like signs of personal failure and government meddling or coddling. From this perspective, it is to rural folks' credit that they rely on them less than "we" do in the cities and suburbs. And this brings us to the next rut in rural communications – a (misplaced) emphasis on the virtue of rural Americans.

Rut #2: The good news about Rural America

When rural advocates are not emphasizing the problems facing rural America, they are likely to be focusing on the unique virtues and assets associated with these parts of the country:

The people who live on this land are the storehouse of our history, the keepers of our values and the guardians of our environment.

Rural schools tend to be small and community centered—attributes that many urban schools are trying to gain by making large schools smaller. Benefits of small schools include:

- *Strong community and parent involvement*
- *Improved academic achievement*
- *Higher graduation rates*
- *Fewer discipline problems*
- *The chance for every child to participate in school activities*
- *The chance for every child to be known by teachers, administrators, and peers*

America's affection for rural life and culture can be an effective tool for influencing public debate.

It is up to us to take a stand for the family farms, small businesses, and values that make

Rural America strong.

The problem with messages like these is that they can trigger and reinforce the positive stereotypes of rural people and rural life in which the countryside is filled with poor but noble, tough and hard-working people living healthier and fundamentally better lives than the rest of us – a mode of thinking we have referred to as the Rural Utopia model.

Casting rural life in such a glowing light would seem to be desirable, on the theory that it should motivate people to care. But this mode of thinking is actually as counterproductive as the Rural Dystopia model. After all, the inspiring rural landscape would be marred by modern infrastructure, and rural self-sufficiency would be diminished by urban “services.” The Rural Utopia model suggests that, most of all, rural America needs to be left alone, or at best, to be preserved like a museum exhibit. This is a model tied closely to nostalgia for the past, making it difficult to wield as a motivator for change and progress.

Like rural suffering, the rural virtue, health and beauty cards are very tempting to play for advocates who are eager for any way into the public conversation. (Note, by the way, that the same communications piece on rural America often tells both the good news and the bad news stories: “Look at these fine people – and the squalor they live in.”) But once advocates take steps down either (or both) of these paths, it is difficult or impossible to shift the conversation in a new and more productive direction.

A more fundamental problem – Rural America as “a world apart”

While trying to raise awareness of rural problems, or remind people of rural assets, advocates often inadvertently reinforce the most critical problem in average metro Americans’ thinking about the topic: the underlying view of rural America as a world somehow entirely different and separate from “our own.” According to the common default ways of thinking, rural life is essentially different from metro life (perhaps healthier, perhaps more difficult, certainly simpler); rural people are essentially different from metro people (perhaps less sophisticated, perhaps more self-sufficient, in any case a different breed); and rural life is disconnected from metro life. What happens on a farm in Missouri or in a small town in Idaho simply bears no causal relation to what happens in Pasadena or Chicago or Westchester County, and may as well take place in a different dimension or on a different planet. This sense of difference and separation has profound impacts on people’s interest in rural issues. And some of advocates’ familiar ways of presenting the good and bad news about rural America only reinforce this damaging perspective.

Parallels with other issue areas

While the discussion so far has focused on the pitfalls that face advocates on rural issues, the same principles apply to other issues as well, and maybe all other issues. Advocates trying to reduce child abuse and neglect are tempted to focus on children’s goodness and innocence, and on the horror of the treatment they sometimes face. Environmental advocates emphasize the beauty and wonder of the places and species that are at risk, as well as the shocking details of how human activities are ravaging the natural world. Demonstrating the worthiness of some person or place or population seems like an effective way of getting people to care, and so does pointing out the nature and scale of “the problem.” But for reasons similar to

those discussed above, the good news and bad news approaches are usually no more effective in other issue areas than they are for rural advocates.

Bad news often triggers various counterproductive understandings lurking in the public mind – from cultural models about the undeserving poor, to incompetent government, to failing schools – models that encourage people to interpret the information offered as confirmation of their prejudices, rather than as a call to action. And good news, while inspiring sympathy or admiration for individuals, often fails to convey the broader context people need in order to grasp a problematic situation and its solutions.

Steering between the ruts

If neither good news nor bad news is an effective tool for engaging broader constituencies on rural issues, what options do advocates have? Fortunately, there are a number of strategies that can help advocates improve the impact of their communications. The thread that unites these approaches is that each involves helping people see rural issues from a broader perspective, rather than allowing them to focus on rural America in isolation.

- *Interconnectedness*

One of the most critical messages advocates can convey is the idea that rural and metro areas are interconnected and share a common fate. What affects one area can affect others. If Americans ignore rural problems we end up with a less prosperous, less healthy country. E.g.,

If residents of less populated areas don't have access to facilities offering preventive health care, the whole state ends up picking up the tab for more costly emergency treatment later.

- *Causal explanations*

Advocates should focus on educating the public about rural matters, and this means more than offering them *facts*, which can easily be misinterpreted or forgotten. It is much more helpful to explain the causality behind rural problems than the symptoms – both because people are more engaged by a dynamic explanation than a static image, and because a causal explanation by definition moves people closer to an understanding of what the solutions might be. E.g.,

The globalization of trade has lowered prices on nearly all agricultural products, drastically reducing the income of the nation's farmers.

As urban dwellers buy land farther and farther from the cities, real estate prices and property taxes are soaring in areas where income has remained stable – people in smaller towns are being priced out of their own homes.

More generally, talking about processes of change in rural America allows the audience to move beyond the default image of a timeless place, where the kinds of (economic) forces that change the faces of cities and suburbs have no effect.

- *Simplifying models*

When advocates explain the changes taking place in rural America it is helpful to offer analogies that can make the discussion clearer and more concrete.

Many of the *traditional pillars* of the rural economy have weakened – industries like timber and mining and fishing.

This thought-provoking image suggests in a vivid way the decline of regional economies.

- *Reducing the difference between rural and metro*

Advocates can make a great deal of headway by narrowing the apparently huge chasm between rural and metro America in the public mind. This may entail pointing out parallels in the lives and needs of people in both kinds of places:

Rural concerns are very much like concerns elsewhere – rural Americans think about jobs, education, and healthcare.

It may also entail creating an image that is incompatible with stereotypes of rural homogeneity:

Rural communities are as diverse and varied as the American landscape. They include coastal fishing villages, Appalachian mining communities, Western mountain towns, ranching communities of the Great Plains, Native American reservations, border colonias, Northwoods towns of New England, and rural farm towns of the Mississippi Delta.

- *Appropriate values messages*

In addition to messages that educate, advocates should think carefully about the values (other than mere positive sentiment) that can motivate people to take rural issues seriously. For instance, messages of empowerment can be very compelling:

Many rural communities are being proactive about making change in their own economic foundations. (Empowerment)

- *Effective solutions*

One proven method for engaging people on an issue is to establish that there are effective steps that can be taken to make positive change.

Public investment in job creation through small business start-ups has proven to a

successful strategy for rural economic development – far more so than recruiting large companies to relocate to rural areas.

Messages about effective solutions can also be seen as tapping into the value of Effectiveness, Can-do.

If advocates craft messages around these ideas, they will have much more success than by playing on rural nostalgia or by painting portraits of rural suffering. These powerful and tempting messages do more harm than good in the end. Once people start moving down these paths, there is little chance the conversation can be redirected along more productive lines.

Recommendations

We conclude with a series of recommendations for effective framing of rural issues, based on FrameWorks' interpretation of the research. These simple lessons are complemented by more developed Talking Points and Applications materials included on the Talking Rural Issues CD-Rom produced for the W. K. Kellogg Foundation.

DON'T:

- Fall into the Rural Utopia or Rural Dystopia frame traps
- Position change as the enemy of rural areas and people
- Wait till the end of the communiqué to surface solutions
- Promote sympathy for, or attempt to prove worthiness of, rural people
- Make government the sole solution, inadvertently evoke the widely held belief that government's intrusion or inefficiency will only make it worse for rural Americans
- Create a competitive mind-set, in which rural, urban and suburban areas compete for the same resources
- Assume that people know how the source of problems affecting rural America nor how they work

DO:

- Connect rural to the rest of the country
- Understand how to make the fairness argument to stress opportunity for all and access to resources for all Americans including rural people
- Position change on the side of positive policy solutions
- Begin with solutions high in the communiqué, to give people hope and avoid the notion that rural demise is inevitable
- Promote empathy and identification with rural people by underscoring sameness, not differences
- Demonstrate empowerment and a solutions-orientation in rural America's civic society, show rural actors engaged in positive change
- Establish shared fate through the impact of rural problems on the rest of the country

- Use simplifying models and causal sequences to drive home the way that policies affect rural life and opportunities
- Understand how different frames may impact different geographic and demographic audiences and build messages most useful to your overall purpose

In addition to the above recommendations, many of the individual research reports convey those researchers' own recommendations for specific aspects of the communications challenge. Most reports can be accessed at www.wkkf.org and www.frameworksinstitute.org.

Specific examples of the incorporation of these recommendations into op/eds, speeches and other communications are offered on the "Talking Rural Issues" CD-Rom.

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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