How to Use the Simplifying Model

In this section of the Toolkit we provide some concrete examples of how communicators can make use of the simplifying model that emerged from the framing research. But first, we will take a moment to review why the model is helpful. We hope this background will clarify and reinforce the hands-on recommendations we provide later in the section.

Purpose of the Simplifying Model

The aim of the simplifying model is to provide a *conceptual focus* that is more productive than the ones people usually default to – including the ones that advocates often choose to evoke. The public's thinking about food and food systems (such as it is) is guided by understandings that often work against productive, big-picture thinking – e.g. the consumer understanding of value-for-money. The goal of the simplifying model is to introduce a new, user-friendly conceptual picture that guides and organizes reasoning in more constructive ways than the current ones.

A Complementary Communications Approach

It is important to note at the outset that the simplifying model discussed in this section was developed as part of a broader communications strategy. This includes other recommendations discussed elsewhere in the Toolkit, such as values cues related to the Legacy Frame, or what kind of food system we leave to future generations. The model is intended to complement and reinforce these other aspects of effective framing and is most helpful when used in combination with them.

Understanding The Model

For the most part, the idea of a "food system" is not part of Americans' conceptual repertoire. Though people are obviously familiar with various pieces of this larger picture, this scattered knowledge is not nearly as compelling or coherent as their default understandings of basic ideas like Smart Shopping, Food That's Good For You, Eating Out, etc. The result is that thinking about food is nearly always dominated by these "little picture" models of personal experience. If there is any hope of strong public support for systemic, policy-level changes to our system of food production and distribution, people need tools to help them focus more easily on, and think more productively about, the

bigger picture. Identifying a tool of this kind was the goal of the simplifying models development project.

The qualitative ("TalkBack") testing of candidate simplifying models established that simply providing people with a more concrete image of the system, such as the "Food Supply Chain," is not sufficient to change their patterns of thinking. (On other issues, this simple strategy can be very effective – e.g. when people are able to think about child development in terms of how experience shapes "brain architecture," they reason differently and more productively about the topic.) When it comes to food, Americans' tendency to take the system for granted is so strong that the issue needs to be "problematized" before thinking can move in new directions. For this reason, the simplifying models development project ended up focusing on finding ways of describing *problems* with the food system, in big-picture terms. The core idea of the model that proved most effective in testing is as follows:

> Our methods of producing food have become so *powerful*, and are so *uncontrolled*, that they are *threatening systems that are vital to our wellbeing*.

This idea never needs to be stated verbatim. But when it is used as an organizing point for talking about problems with the food system, it helps create a conversation that has a number of advantages over the current default patterns.

- It helps people think about food from a perspective other than their own experience.
- It frames the collection of all our various approaches to producing food as aspects of a single, coherent topic.
- It immediately evokes the idea that responsible management is called for. (Note that the qualitative research established that *fear and anxiety are not the responses to the model.*)
- It creates a critical "bottom line" other than cost – i.e. effects on vital systems – for evaluating approaches to producing food.

In the setting of any particular communication, the model will be stated, elaborated and illustrated in a way that suits the context and the communicator's style. Here is an example of a paragraph that was effective in the (unusually demanding) context of TalkBack testing, where people are offered no information beyond these 100 or so words:

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

The first two sentences (underlined) establish the basic concept – using concrete terms/images (Runaway, Foundations) that proved to be memorable and effective in TalkBack testing. The reference to experts' concern cues listeners that this is an issue that deserves their attention.

The next three sentences (italicized) offer examples to illustrate the basic principle. Note that these examples were chosen for breadth and ease of understanding. Communicators will find their own examples to illustrate the principles.

The last sentence restates the basic ideas.

Using the Model

In discussions of policy on any number of issues, the Runaway/Foundations idea can serve as an *organizing principle* that helps make the topic more coherent and significant in people's minds. In order to serve this function, the model should be:

- Introduced very early, rather than as an afterthought
- Returned to more than once
- Connected with other topics in the communication.

Example #1

A press release from CBS Broadcasting, picked up by the Associated Press ("Soda Fueling Obesity Epidemic," 9/21/04), looks at a significant change in how Americans get their calories – increasingly from sweetened drinks like soda, and less and less from milk. The piece places the information squarely within a consumer frame, and begins as follows:

> For the first time, Americans are getting more of their calories from soft drinks than from milk, reports The Early Show medical correspondent Dr. Emily Senay. Researchers at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill analyzed national beverage consumption patterns for more than 73,000 Americans, age 2 and older. The study discovered that between 1977 and 2001:
>
> - Overall calories from sweetened beverages were up 135 percent.
> - Overall, Americans got 38 percent fewer daily calories from milk.

- Americans now get an average of 144 calories a day from sugar-sweetened soft drinks and only 99 calories from milk.
- For young people aged 2-18, milk fell from 13.2 percent of total calories to 8.3 percent, and soda consumption doubled.

The FrameWorks research confirms that most readers are likely to blame irresponsible individual consumers for the change – or, at best, the continuing degradation of our culture and values. Neither of these conclusions can lead to a more productive stance towards food systems, or in fact to any thoughts at all about food systems.

Of course, the data does present an opportunity for consideration of the bigger picture. A press release about the very same UNC study might have pointed out how our runaway food system subsidizes the production of corn syrup and other sweeteners, directly contributing to an increasing market emphasis on processed foods laden with refined sugars and to our current obesity epidemic:

> The dramatic shift in recent decades towards sugar-centered food production was largely unplanned, and is symptomatic of what experts are calling a runaway food system – a situation with serious consequences on everything from resource management to environmental and human health.

Example #2

An op-ed published in the *New York Times* (4/12/06) makes an explicit and eye-catching link between animal cruelty and human health, a link that most readers will presumably not have been aware of:

> Do the animal rights nuts know something we don't?
>
> As we observe the growing number of avian flu cases worldwide, bide time until the eventual large-scale outbreak of mad cow disease in the United States and hope what the world experienced in 2004 wasn't just a dress rehearsal for SARS, the time has come to reconsider humanity's treatment of nonhuman animals -- if only for the repercussions to our own health.
>
> In past decades we have removed animals from pastures, sunshine and fresh air to stack them on top of each other in petri-dish-like buildings. ..
>
> Because factory farms are legally recognized as farms -- not the industrial sites they are -- they are exempt from many of our most important environmental laws. The communities surrounding most factory farms have become wastelands from the constant flow of toxic emissions and waste polluting the air, ground and water. Inside the farms, safety and human health also take a back seat to profit. Animals too sick or diseased to stand are dragged or bulldozed to slaughter and into our food supply. Mad cow disease was born of such recklessness and greed --

> a desire by corporations to minimize financial losses by using the remains of diseased animals to feed the animals that enter our food supply.

Underlying this link is a systems-based perspective that ties our broader approach to food production to large-scale environmental damage. The conceptual hooks of "animal cruelty" and "human health," however, lead back to a little-picture perspective. The absence of a simplifying model that makes the bigger picture "easy to think" all but guarantees that readers will respond to this story as consumers rather than citizens.

The metaphor of a runaway food system and damage to foundations could be inserted early on to serve as an organizing principle for the wide variety of unnatural and worrisome trends in food production cited by the author. The third and fourth paragraphs then might read as follows:

> In what amounts to a runaway system of food production, we have removed animals from pastures, sunshine and fresh air to stack them on top of each other in petri-dish-like buildings…
>
> Because factory farms are legally recognized as farms -- not the industrial sites they are -- they are exempt from many of our most important environmental laws. In a direct threat to the environmental foundations that our health depends on, the communities surrounding most factory farms have become wastelands from …

Example #3

An article in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (2/20/04) frames the emergence of a new generation of environmentally-minded consumers as mainstream rather than fringe. While it makes reference to these consumers' "consciousness of the Earth," it also emphasizes a little-picture consumer perspective by framing their stance as a tradeoff between environmental values and cost.

> Move over, Granolas. Make way for LOHASes, mainstream consumers who make purchases with a "lifestyle of health and sustainability" in mind.
>
> You probably know them.
>
> They put their money where their beliefs are, making purchases that are environmentally friendly and socially responsible.
>
> Whether it's low-odor paint or unbleached sheets, these folks believe they can save the planet one purchase at a time, even if it means paying slightly more.
>
> "We attribute it to people's growing consciousness about their Earth," says Alice Rolls, executive director of Georgia Organics, an organization that promotes organic and sustainable farming practices. "The things we buy can be a moral decision we make. It's not just about the price tag. It's about the impact of our purchases."

> "This is akin to a decision to give to charity. You put money into something because you believe in it and it's the right thing to do," says Howard Frumkin, an Emory University physician and professor.

This discussion frames consumer choices as individual moral acts, comparable to giving to charity, without clarifying what the issues at stake might be exactly – certain kinds of purchases are simply "good" in some vague sense. The piece misses an opportunity to provide readers with a bigger picture, and is unlikely to shift people to a new perspective about policies as well as purchases. (Never mind the jocular tone that sets the "LOHASes" up as greener-than-thou targets of resentment or even ridicule.) An article about the exact same trend could do much more to enlighten readers if it noted that Americans are more and more interested in making sure that we're protecting the foundations of our well-being, and getting our runaway food system under control, *through a variety of actions, including more thoughtful purchasing*.

Causal Sequences

In addition to the simplifying model, another important tool for helping people achieve a new perspective on food issues is clear causal statements. Since average Americans have so little experience thinking about food in systems terms, it is very helpful to give them clear explanations and illustrations of the dynamics of the food system – the ways in which particular aspects of our current approach lead to particular outcomes. These may seem obvious to insiders, yet come as enlightening news to lay people.

More specifically, we recommend the use of "causal sequences" – miniature "stories" of how one thing leads to another, in the form A ("initial condition") leads to B ("middle term") leads to C ("final consequence/problem"). This three-part structure – if it is explained tightly and concisely – helps people understand *how* A leads to C. This sort of understanding provides a particularly satisfying kind of explanation, and one that people are likely to remember and actually use in interpreting subsequent information on the issue.

Useful causal sequences related to food systems would include:

- Subsidies to corn farmers (A) contribute to huge surpluses of corn (B), which therefore end up getting turned into ever-increasing quantities of fattening corn-based sweeteners in our diet (C).
- Grocery chains pull out of low-income neighborhoods (A), meaning that there are no sources of affordable, fresh food in large parts of cities like Detroit (B), and people there have to make do with expensive, unhealthy and fattening food instead (C).
- Increasing use of wasteful irrigation practices (A) is depleting underground water reserves (B) and threatening to make agriculture impossible in some areas (C).

- When produce needs to be shipped hundreds or thousands of miles to be sold (A), this means that producers must develop new breeds of produce that can withstand travel and storage (B), and that often turn out to be less nutritious (C).

Any communicator on food-related issues can undoubtedly come up with many, many more such examples.

For more discussion of how and why to use three-part causal sequences, see "Strengthening Advocacy By Explaining "Causal Sequences'" (FrameWorks Institute E-zine number 31 at www.frameworksinstitute.org), by Axel Aubrun and Joseph Grady, Cultural Logic.