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The Topos Partnership was founded in 2007 by experienced message strategists Axel Aubrun Ph.D., Meg Bostrom, MA, and Joe Grady, Ph.D., and works to help advocacy organizations develop communications that successfully engage action and support. Topos' unique and innovative approach synthesizes expertise from the cognitive and social sciences as well as public opinion. Most of the insights and examples in the paper emerged from the research Topos principals have conducted for a wide range of organizations over the past 10 or more years.

Introduction

Framing is a term that has become popular in political circles over the past ten years, but it is used in such different ways that it risks losing all meaning and becoming just a trendy word for communications.

We hope that this short paper will be a useful resource to help advocates, funders, and consumers of framing research understand the gist of framing, and why it can make the difference between effective and ineffective communications.



In particular, we hope it will help progressive organizations take greater advantage of communications opportunities. Frankly, progressives are currently playing catch-up. Many organizations talk about framing while continuing to operate mainly within the traditional and limited frames that progressives have long defaulted to – or, worse yet, the frames conservatives define.

Obviously this is not due to a lack of desire to communicate effectively. Instead, we believe that it is largely due to lack of framing expertise and capacity across the community.

Constellations

Frames organize information. Consider a familiar constellation, like the Big Dipper. Cultures throughout human history have seen patterns like this one in the sky.



Constellations are simple, familiar pictures that impose sense and meaning on the random scatter of stars above us. Without them, our eyes would still register all of the bright dots that make them up, but a random scatter of points is utterly different from a simple, coherent, “user-friendly” chunk that we can remember, point to and talk about. In short, constellations are organizing ideas that allow us to see and remember things we otherwise couldn't.

The same process plays out as people think about any topic; thinking and perception are guided by simple organizing ideas. When they are thinking about gun control, for instance, people's perception may be guided by a simple organizing idea like Freedom: People should be free to make their own choices.

Importantly, there can be alternative ideas that organize the same information differently and give it a different meaning. The Big Dipper, for instance, is also known as the Plough (in England), and makes up just one part of the Great Bear (Ursa Major) known to classical civilizations. Likewise, there are always choices when it comes to framing public interest issues. Rather than freedom, for instance, gun control can be thought about in terms of self-protection, or tragic accidents that kill kids. Obviously, different organizing ideas can have very different implications – a point we will return to below.

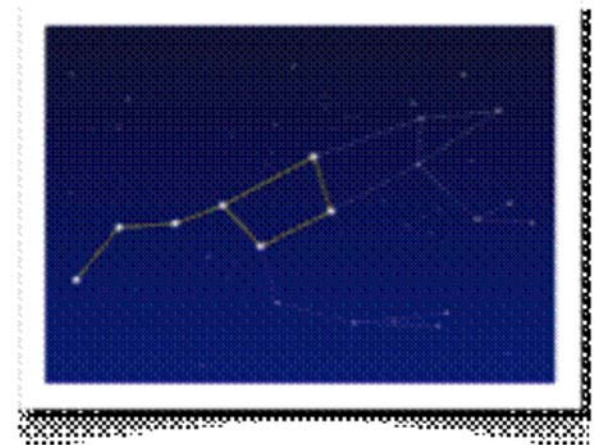
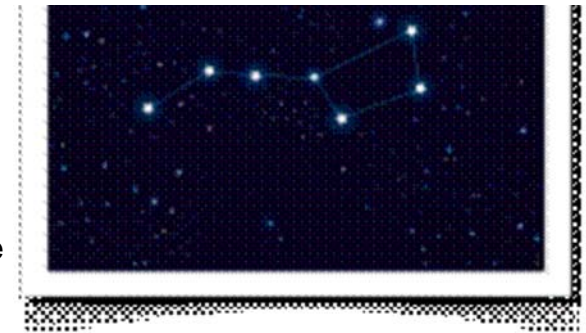
Note that many messaging discussions end up focusing on variants of a single theme, rather than really exploring new organizing ideas. For example, the message *“people who work hard should make a fair wage”* may be more or less effective than the message *“working people deserve an income that supports a family”* but both use the same organizing lens of one group and their needs, rather than, for example, exploring a big picture perspective on how the overall economy benefits when working people have higher incomes.

Without a clear organizing idea, people confronted with “information” about an issue can sometimes feel like they're looking at a random scatter rather than a meaningful picture – for instance when they hear lots of facts and figures about a topic that they basically don't understand. This lack of a clear picture either leaves people confused and disengaged, or allows them to default to an unintended organizing idea that backfires on communicators.

Organizing Ideas & Public Interest Issues

Let's consider some concrete examples of how organizing ideas figure in our thinking about public interest issues – and in particular, how shifting to a different organizing idea can lead to very different thinking.

Watersheds



Topos research in New England found that most people don't know what a watershed is, so there is a real risk of the "random scatter" problem when advocates communicate. On the other hand, there is also a strong default idea that often rushes in to fill the vacuum.

Strong default organizing idea: The WATER itself – thinking tends to focus on everything that directly affects a body of water, such as garbage or sewage dumped right into the river. Consequently, the policy conversation ends up narrowly focusing on water pollution.

More constructive organizing idea: Watersheds are like a BASIN, with water (and other material) flowing from everywhere in the region to the bodies of water at the "bottom." When people shift to this perspective they see that all land is part of a watershed and everything that happens on land has widespread consequences. With this idea shaping their thinking, people immediately recognize the relevance of zoning, agricultural policy and so on.



Arts

Even a seemingly non-contentious issue like the arts can be undermined by problematic organizing ideas.

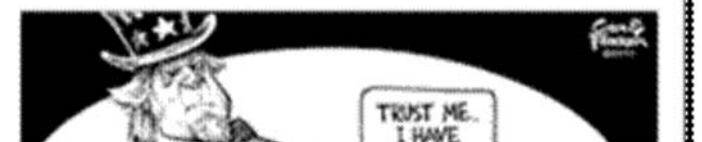
Strong default organizing idea: Arts as entertainment – people may have strong and positive feelings about the arts, while seeing them through the lens of personal entertainment. In this view, entertainment is a "luxury," and the "market" will determine which arts offerings survive, based on people's tastes as consumers of entertainment. Consequently, public support for the arts makes little sense, particularly when public funds are scarce.

More constructive organizing idea: The arts create ripple effects of benefits, such as vibrant, thriving neighborhoods where we all want to live and work. This is not only compelling, but it also sets an expectation for public responsibility for the arts.

Nuclear Weapons

A number of leading experts and public officials of both political parties advocate for a nuclear-free world. However, the public is largely unconvinced so far.

Strong default organizing idea: Nukes keep us safe – Nuclear weapons are often viewed as simply our most destructive weapon, therefore our biggest and best tool for self-protection, essentially a shield. In this frame, disarmament sounds like we are voluntarily giving up our security, or ("cutting off our arm" as



the cartoon at right suggests) and advocates sound naïvely idealistic at best.

More constructive organizing idea: Nukes create risk in today's world, rather than reduce it – Nuclear weapons are a liability, because they don't help with current risks. You can't nuke terrorists, but terrorists could get their hands on nukes. And the sheer volume means there is a lot of opportunity for accident or theft, leading to destruction that affects us all. In this view, nukes (including our own) are like a ticking bomb in the basement.

In all these cases, shifting to a new organizing idea means arriving at new conclusions about important questions such as:

1. Who are the relevant players?
2. What's at stake?
3. What solutions make sense?

Leading vs. Following

Unfortunately, effective communication often isn't as simple as helping people shift to a different, familiar perspective. It can be very hard work developing and promoting what is essentially a new organizing idea – and it often means moving outside an organization's comfort zone.

In an important sense, much of progressive advocacy is currently defensive – working within Americans' existing, default understandings. For instance, progressives are often eager to sound “tough” on security or immigration, or to avoid discussing unpopular or complicated positions (such as nuclear disarmament or carbon limits). And strategists often reinforce this instinct by viewing public opinion as a constraint on discourse – politicians either “can” or “can't” take certain positions based on the popular views measured in surveys, for instance.

But real change often isn't possible unless advocates make an effective case for a position that is currently unpopular or poorly understood. While daunting, it is critical to go on the offense and work to fundamentally reshape how people think about an issue.

Rather than mimic Tea Party anger in order to win elections, for instance, progressive candidates will ultimately be more successful – and will have a much easier time governing – if they find effective ways to establish the real value of the public sector, rather than run against it. An effective organizing idea should not only “win” in the short-term, but also set the right dynamic in motion for long-term policy. (For example, a focus on the physical and organizational “public structures” that underlie American prosperity and quality of life has great potential to help in both ways.)

Of course, identifying organizing ideas with this potential is usually not easy. But developing them can make the difference



between creating the space for real change, and simply making the best of what we perceive as unfortunate limits on progress.

“New Common Sense”

To be truly effective, an organizing idea must strike people as common sense when they hear it.

In nearly every issue area, progressives are likely to be competing with ways of thinking about the topic that work against their goals, yet feel like common sense to many:

1. The government is inefficient, beset by bickering, made up of self-interested politicians, etc.
2. Poor people are largely responsible for their own fate – didn't the rest of us work hard to earn what we've got?
3. Regulations make it harder for businesses to prosper.
4. Etc.

To compete in a terrain populated with strong and stubborn “common sense” ideas like these, a new organizing idea must have the qualities that make it also sound like common sense: It must be clear and concrete, easy to remember and talk about, and must reflect how the world really works (as opposed to wishful thinking or ideological proselytizing).

It must also strike people as a new take on a familiar topic. In most issue areas, people feel they have heard the same old ideas a million times – but a new insight has a chance of standing out, sticking around, and reshaping thought and discourse.

What About Values and Emotion?

People often assume that framing is about “highlighting values.” While connecting to relevant values is important, it is usually insufficient by itself. It is just as important for people to understand how an issue and a value are connected.

Consider different approaches to taxation. Critics of a particular tax that disproportionately affects poor and working class people – such as a grocery tax – are naturally inclined to argue that this kind of tax is “unfair.” The trouble is that the word “fair” is interpreted in wildly different ways and can be used to argue for the most progressive to the most regressive approaches – is it “fair” for 5% of the population to pay 50% of the taxes? Isn't a flat tax the “fairest” approach of all?

Rather than simply demanding a “fair” approach to taxes, advocates of a particular approach must help audiences understand how a particular approach can be seen as unfair. For example, our work in Alabama suggests the following core idea is effective at helping people rethink the state's approach to taxes: “Alabama struggles to get things done due to its Upside Down tax system, in which average families pay 10% of their income in taxes, while the wealthiest families pay less than 5%.” The organizing idea of an “upside down system” effectively turns the “common sense” view that the wealthy pay more taxes on its head.

Similarly, appeals to emotion often have a limited effect, or can even backfire, if people are looking at the issue through a lens

(organizing idea) that obscures important parts of the story, or that leads to an unintended interpretation (blame the victim, etc.).

Everything Counts

Once we have identified the organizing idea that gives us the best chance of moving conversation in a constructive direction, how do we promote it?

The key is to repeat the organizing idea often and in a variety of ways. It should guide choices about all elements of a communication, such as:

1. The points we do and do not include (Some arguments might be valid, but work against the chosen frame.)
2. The messengers we use (Messengers can evoke, or clash with, frames – e.g. a farmer taking about watersheds can help evoke the idea that all land use decisions ultimately have consequences that flow to bodies of water.)
3. Images (Obviously, images can be helpful tools for promoting an organizing idea – an arts organization might show photos of vibrant neighborhoods rather than virtuoso performers, for instance.)
4. Supporting facts and examples – some of which will work for and others against a particular organizing idea.

Conclusion: A Tough but Critical Effort

It's never easy to change common sense. By definition it has been established through repetition, the media, and so forth over time. In addition, we as humans tend to seek confirmation of what we already know, which means that "new" information tends to be re/misinterpreted as confirmation of what we already believe.

Learning and following general framing principles (sticking to a coherent frame, using social math, offering explanations, etc.) will go a long way toward improving progressive organizations' communications. However, it is also critical to investigate the issue-specific dynamics that build or undermine support in a particular issue area. Since we all carry frames around with us, it can be particularly challenging to see our own issues in new ways. In the end, there is often no substitute for framing research that employs a variety of cognitive methods to uncover the effects of frames on thinking over time, and to develop the new frames that will create a lasting foundation of support for progressive solutions, helping us get beyond the "plateaus" of awareness and support where too many issues have lingered for decades.

Tease:

Framing is a term that has become popular in political and advocacy circles, but it is used in such different ways that it risks becoming just a trendy word for communications. This short paper is intended as a useful resource to help advocates, funders, and others understand how frames act as "organizing ideas," and why framing can make the difference between effective and ineffective communications.

Essay

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