

Communications for Social Good

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Executive Summary

If foundations are more intentional in using communications as a tool for social change, and if they incorporate what is known about how the media affect individuals and groups into their grantmaking, they will be much more likely to achieve the kind of long-term change in public understanding and opinion that is needed to maximize their impact. This paper presents the latest perspectives from communications theory and practice in order to update philanthropic thinking and help philanthropists judge effective communications practices among their grantees and within their own organizations.

Communications Thinking

In order to evaluate its utility to grantmaking, foundations must appreciate the role that communications plays in public thinking and public life. Prevailing theory in the field of communications posits close, but complicated, connections among these phenomena. Three core concepts can help clarify and focus foundation thinking. These concepts are: agenda-setting, framing, and persuasion. First, public opinion research over the past decade confirms that news media constitute the main source of Americans' information about public affairs. The real world is increasingly viewed through the lens of the news media. As issues rise and fall on the news media agenda, so does their potential for attracting the attention of the public and its policymakers. The ability of the news media to set the public agenda determines to a large extent what issues policymakers will feel compelled to address. Indeed, media are often read by policymakers as the proxy for public opinion. These findings elaborate the core communications concept of “agenda-setting.”

Second, news media do more than tell us what to think about; they also direct how we think about particular social issues—whether, for example, we consider them to be individual problems necessitating better behaviors or whether they are collective, social problems requiring structural policy and program solutions. Messages conveyed by mainstream media take on the value of public narratives about the ways of the world, and different types of stories produce different social learning. When news frames public issues narrowly, as problems of specific people or groups, support for policy proposals plummets. When a media story highlights conditions

and trends, by contrast, public support for policies to address the problem increases dramatically. Further, how the media frame or present public issues is critical to the final resolution of public problems. Not only can framing affect whether the solution to any given social problem is judged by the public to be individual or collective, but the media's use of a specific frame is an important influence on the way people judge the relevance and legitimacy of a communication's implicit or explicit call to action. This set of findings elaborates the communications concept called "framing."

Third, the news media influence how people think about attitudes and behaviors they need to adopt in order to enhance their own well-being or prevent individual loss—the communications concept called persuasion. Persuasion theorists focus on the responses of the target audience to messages which are largely seen as "pushed out" through media. For example, a persuasion campaign oriented to improving children's health might adopt a message like, "Oral health: it's not just about your teeth," building off the documented impression that one of the major personal obstacles to brushing is the erroneous belief that the health of the mouth does not influence overall health. Persuasive communications are particularly well-suited to the goal of changing individual behavior, even if the messages are broadcast to mass publics, rather than to social change goals that focus on the opportunities and constraints on individuals' behavior.

Communication Practices

Communications campaigns have traditionally been classified according to their end target or locus of change: the individual consumer or the mass public. Those aimed at the individual tend to draw their strategies and tools from a commercial perspective, using public relations, marketing, and advertising as the foundation for their campaigns. Publicly oriented campaigns tend to rely upon the theory and practice of politics as their foundation. The paper describes seven schools of communications practice that reflect these two orientations. The schools that target individual consumers, based on commercial perspectives and techniques, include: public relations, public service advertising, and social marketing. The schools that target collective publics, based on political perspectives and techniques, include: grassroots social mobilization, policy campaigns, media advocacy, and strategic frame analysis.

What foundations can learn from these different schools of practice is, above all, intentionality. Together, these different schools arrange and deploy different techniques, based on their understanding of the core concepts of agenda-setting, framing, and persuasion, and arrive at different conclusions about what matters in communications campaigning. For funders, an important lesson is that the variety exists, and that the different practices can be used critically to refine any communications campaign's theory of change, tools of analysis, operational strategy, products,

and evaluation design. The simple question “What kind of campaign do we need for this problem?” is an improvement over the imprecision that currently characterizes philanthropic communications. The comparisons offered in the paper set the stage for communications campaigns that can realize the promise of being truly “strategic.”

Communications Practice: Tools and Techniques

A wide array of specific tools and techniques can be enlisted to support different organizational objectives. The paper’s discussion of these is organized around Harold Lasswell’s enduring five-questions model of communications: “Who says what to whom via what channels with what effects?” as well as a sixth important question added by later researchers: Why? For each of the six questions, the authors present research that supports and explains its importance, followed by a series of leading questions to guide communications planners through decisions about each element of a communications campaign. For example, questions at the problem identification stage of planning a communications strategy—addressing the question of why communicate—include:

- What is the social problem we are addressing?
- What are its characteristics?
- What do people already know about it, and how do they think about it?
- What have been the dominant frames of media coverage of the issue?
- What do we think should be done to improve/solve it?
- What do experts believe should be done to improve/solve it?
- What is our policy agenda or what are our objectives in tackling this problem?
- What is our theory of change, e.g., how do we think our efforts can prove helpful?
- What objective indicators would suggest to us that opinion/policy/behavior is moving in the right direction?
- What is the appropriate role for communications in the broader strategy?
- What schools of communications practice seem best oriented to this problem?

Lessons

The rarity with which scholars, policy advocates, and foundation program officers are involved together in the practical business of devising better approaches to communications in the public interest is a costly oversight in the evolution of philanthropy. There are numerous ways in which this can be remedied. Foundations with common agendas can collaborate by studying changes in public discourse on these issues. More systematic planning and evaluation of campaigns would result in better comparisons and more real lessons learned. The systematic incorporation of a theoretical framework and research into funded activities would build better overall capacity among grantees which, in turn, would accrue value across entire fields. In any case, foundations can play an important convening role in communications thinking, as well as in insisting on well-planned communications campaigns that demonstrate an understanding of the way communications works, both theoretically and practically. We will know we have arrived at this juncture when foundation communications funding is devoted not merely to dissemination but equally to understanding the communications context in which social problems occur and persist. And we will know foundations understand the potential of “communications for social good” when communications funding is integrated robustly into all grants that seek to improve the social good.