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Are Frames Enough?

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"What is power? Power is the ability to say what the issues are and who the good guys and bad guys are. That is power."

Conservative pundit Kevin Phillips

Social movements in the United States have long recognized "framing" as a critical component of political success. A frame is a thought organizer, highlighting certain events and facts as important and rendering others invisible. Politicians and movement organizations have scurried to framing workshops and hired consultants who promise to help identify a winning message. In the current political climate, demoralized social movements and activists find this promise appealing.

After two decades of conducting framing workshops at the Media/Movement Research and Action Project (MRAP), which we codirect, we have concluded that framing is necessary but not sufficient. Framing is valuable for focusing a dialogue with targeted constituencies. It is not external packaging intended to attract news media and bystanders; rather, it involves a strategic dialogue intended to shape a particular group into a coherent movement. A movement-building strategy needs to ground itself in an analysis of existing power relations and to position supporters and allies to best advantage. Used strategically, framing permeates the work of building a movement: acquiring resources, developing infrastructure and leadership, analyzing power, and planning strategy. The following success story illustrates this approach.

October 2003: The setting was unusual for a press conference—a pristine, cape-style house surrounded by a white picket fence. The mailbox in front read A. Victim. The car in the driveway had a Rhode Island license plate, VICTIM. The crowd in front of the makeshift podium included film crews, photographers, and reporters from every major news outlet in Rhode Island.

The young woman at the podium wore a T-shirt and carried a coffee mug, both reading, "I'm being abused." Her mouth was taped shut. As the crowd grew silent, she pulled off the tape and began to speak. "Domestic violence is never this obvious. This could be any neighborhood, any

community. But as victims, we don't wear signs to let you know we're being abused." After a pause, she continued, "Look around you to your left and right. We are everywhere, in all walks of life." At that, the cameras swiveled around to capture a sea of faces in the audience. Scattered throughout the crowd were other survivors of domestic violence, each with her mouth taped shut. That evening and the following day, the press carried the words and images.

The press conference was the beginning of a campaign by the Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence (RICADV) in collaboration with its survivor task force, Sisters Overcoming Abusive Relations (SOAR). The campaign was part of a continuing effort to reframe how domestic violence is understood—as a widespread problem requiring social, not individual, solutions. Follow-ups to the press conference included events at schools and churches, soccer tournaments, and softball games involving police, firefighters, and college teams, dances, fashion shows, health fairs, self-defense classes, marches, and candlelight vigils, culminating in a Halloween party and open house sponsored by SOAR.

The campaign was a new chapter in a multiyear effort not only to reframe public understanding of domestic violence but to translate into practice this call for social, not private, responses. RICADV promoted a seven-point plan to close gaps in the safety net of domestic violence services and, along with SOAR and other allies, shepherded the plan through the Rhode Island legislature.

As recently as the mid-1990s, when RICADV began working with MRAP on using the media for social change, the media coverage and public understanding of domestic violence issues was very different. The Rhode Island media, like the media in general, framed domestic violence issues as private tragedies. A typical story told of a decent man who had lost control, cracking under life's burdens: "A model employee whose life fell apart," read one *Providence Journal* headline (March 22, 1999). Or neighbors say that they could never imagine their friendly neighbor shooting his wife and child before turning the gun on himself: "They seemed nice, you know. They always seemed to get along as far as I could see" (*Providence Journal*, April 29,

1996). The media coverage of domestic violence a decade later reflects a successful effort to reframe the political debate.

Why Framing Matters

Like a picture frame, an issue frame marks off some part of the world. Like a building frame, it holds things together. It provides coherence to an array of symbols, images, and arguments, linking them through an underlying organizing idea that suggests what is essential—what consequences and values are at stake. We do not see the frame directly, but infer its presence by its characteristic expressions and language. Each frame gives the advantage to certain ways of talking and thinking, while it places others "out of the picture."

Sociologists, cognitive psychologists, political scientists, and communications scholars have been writing about and doing frame analysis for the past 30 years. With the help of popular books such as psychologist George Lakoff's *Don't Think of an Elephant!*, the idea that defining the terms of a debate can determine the outcome of that debate has spread from social science and is rapidly becoming part of popular wisdom.

A Few Things We Know about Frames

- Facts take on their meaning by being embedded in frames, which render them relevant and significant or irrelevant and trivial. The contest is lost at the outset if we allow our adversaries to define what facts are relevant. To be conscious of framing strategy is not manipulative. It is a necessary part of giving coherent meaning to what is happening in the world, and one can either do it unconsciously or with deliberation and conscious thought.

  The idea dies hard that the truth would set us free if only the media did a better job of presenting the facts, or people did a better job of paying attention. Some progressives threw up their hands in dismay and frustration when polls showed that most Bush voters in 2004 believed there was a connection between al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein. The "fact" was clear that no connection had been found.

If these voters did not know this, it was because either the news media had failed in their responsibility to inform them, or they were too lazy and inattentive to take it in.

But suppose one frames the world as a dangerous place in which the forces of evil—a hydra-headed monster labeled "terrorism"—confront the forces of good. This frame depicts Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda as two heads of the same monster. In this frame, whether or not agents actually met or engaged in other forms of communication is nit-picking and irrelevant.

- People carry around multiple frames in their heads. We have more than one way of framing an issue or an event. A specific frame may be much more easily triggered and habitually used, but others are also part of our cultural heritage and can be triggered and used as well, given the appropriate cues. For example, regarding the issue of same-sex marriage, witness the vulnerability of the Defense of Marriage frame. What it defends is an idea—in the minds of its advocates, a sacred idea. The idea is that a man and a woman vow commitment to each other until death parts them and devote themselves to the raising of a new generation.

  Same-sex couples can and do enter into relationships that, except for their gender, fit the sacred idea very well—they are committed to each other for life and to raising a new generation. Part of the ambivalence that many traditionalists feel about the issue comes from their uneasy knowledge that same-sex couples may honor this idea as much or more than do opposite-sex couples. In the alternative frame, the focus of the issue is not on gender, but on the question, Why should two people who are committed for life be denied legal recognition of their commitment, with all of the attendant rights and responsibilities, just because they are of the same sex?

  One important reframing strategy involves making the issue less abstract and more personal. Sociologist Jeffrey Langstraat describes the use of this strategy in the debate in the Massachusetts State House. A generally conservative legislator, who somewhat unexpectedly found himself supporting same-sex marriage, called it "putting a face on the issue." He pointed to a well-liked and respected fellow legislator involved in a long term, same-sex relationship. "How can we say to her," he asked his colleagues, "that her love and commitment [are] less worthy than ours?"

- Successful reframing involves the ability to enter into the worldview of our adversaries. A good rule of thumb is that we should be able to describe a frame that we disagree with so that an advocate would say, "Yes, this is what I believe." Not long ago, a reporter at a rare George Bush press conference asked the president why he kept talking about a connection between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda when no facts supported it. When the president responded, "The reason why I keep talking about there being a connection is because there is a connection," he was not lying or being obtuse and stupid, he was relying on an unstated frame. Frames are typically implicit, and although Bush did not explicitly invoke the metaphor of the hydra-headed monster or the axis of evil, we can reasonably infer that he had something like this in mind—the forces of evil are gathering, and only America can stop them.

- All frames contain implicit or explicit appeals to moral principles. While many analysts of conflicts among frames emphasize how frames diagnose causes and offer prognoses about consequences, Lakoff usefully focuses on the moral values they invoke. Rather than classifying frames into those that emphasize causes and consequences and those that emphasize moral values, however, it is even more useful to think of all frames as having diagnostic, prognostic, and moral components.

Why Framing Is Not All that Matters

Too much emphasis on the message can draw our attention away from the carriers of frames and the complicated and uneven playing fields on which they compete. Successful challenges to official or dominant frames frequently come from social movements and the advocacy groups they spawn. Although they compete on a field in which inequalities in power and resources play a major role in determining outcomes, some

movements have succeeded dramatically against long odds in reframing the terms of political debate. To succeed, framing strategies must be integrated with broader movement-building efforts. This means building and sustaining the carriers of these frames in various ways—for example, by helping them figure out how to gain access where it is blocked or how to enable groups with similar goals to collaborate more effectively.

Too narrow a focus on the message, with a corresponding lack of attention to movement-building, reduces framing strategy to a matter of pitching metaphors for electoral campaigns and policy debates, looking for the right hot-button language to trigger a one-shot response. Adapted from social marketing, this model ignores the carriers and the playing field, focusing only on the content of the message. In isolation from constituency-building, criticism of the media, and democratic media reform, framing can become simply a more sophisticated but still ungrounded variation on the idea that "the truth will set you free." The problem with the social-marketing model is not that it doesn't work—in the short run, it may—but that it doesn't help those engaged in reframing political debates to sustain collective efforts over time and in the face of formidable obstacles.

Political conservatives did not build political power merely by polishing their message in ways that resonate effectively with broader cultural values. They also built infrastructure and relationships with journalists and used their abundant resources to amplify the message and repeat it many times. Duane Oldfield shows how the Christian Right built media capacity and cultivated relationships with key political actors in the Republican Party, greatly expanding the carriers of their message beyond the original movement network. Wealthy conservatives donated large amounts of money to conservative think tanks that not only fine-tuned this message but also created an extended network of relationships with journalists and public officials.

Participatory Communication

The Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence did not succeed because it found a better way to frame its message but because it found a better model than social marketing to guide its work. Call it the participatory communication model. The social marketing model treats its audience as individuals whose citizenship involves voting and perhaps conveying their personal opinions to key decision makers. The alternative model treats citizens as collective actors—groups of people who interact, who are capable of building long-term relationships with journalists and of carrying out collaborative, sustained reframing efforts that may involve intense conflict.

Widely used in the Global South, this alternative approach—inspired by Paulo Freire—argues that without communications capacity, those directly affected by inequalities of power cannot exercise "the right and power to intervene in the social order and change it through political praxis." The first step is to map the power relations that shape structural inequalities in a given social and historical context. This strategic analysis informs the next phase, in which communities directly affected by structural inequalities cooperate to bring about change. This is empowerment through collective action. Finally, participatory communication models include a third, recurring step—reflection.

By encouraging reflection about framing practices, participatory communicators foster ongoing dialogues that build new generations of leaders and extend relational networks. "Everyone is a communicator," says RICADV, and all collective action embodies frames. SOAR's staging of the bit of street theater described at the beginning of this article did not come out of the blue. SOAR was part of the Rhode Island Coalition, which had been building communication infrastructure during a decade of collaboration with MRAP.

MRAP and RICADV began working together in 1996, but to begin our story there would be historically inaccurate. RICADV explains to all new members that they "stand on the shoulders" of the women who founded the domestic violence movement in the 1970s. The Rhode Island Coalition against Domestic Violence began in 1979 and, until 1991, operated roughly on a feminist consensus model. At this point an organizational expansion began that resulted in the hiring of new staff in 1995. The framing successes we describe, therefore, grew out of one of the more successful initiatives of the U.S. women's movement. Groups working to end domestic violence

during the last three decades can claim significant progress, including the establishment of research, preventive education, support systems, and the training of public safety, social service, and health care providers.

History matters. In this case, the efforts on which RICADV built had already established many critical movement-building components:

- Activists had established a social movement organization committed to a mission of social change—to end domestic violence in the state of Rhode Island.
- They had established a statewide service network with local chapters in each region of the state.
- They had created a statewide policy organization to integrate the horizontal network into focused political action at the state and national legislative levels.
- They had obtained government funding for part of RICADV's education and service work, protecting the organization against fluctuation in other revenue sources such as fundraisers, corporate sponsors, donations, and grants.
- On the grassroots level, RICADV had supported the growth of an organization that encouraged victims of domestic violence to redefine themselves as survivors capable of using their experience to help others.
- Finally, they had created a physical infrastructure—an office, staff, computerized mailing lists, internal communication tools such as newsletters, and institutionalized mechanisms for community outreach. The most prominent of these was Domestic Violence Awareness Month in October, during which stories about domestic violence are commonly shared.

In short, RICADV's framing successes were made possible by the generous donations of people who had formed a social movement that encouraged internal discussion, decision making, strategic planning, focused collective action, resource accumulation, coalition-building, reflection, and realignment. The conscious use of framing as a strategic tool for integrating its worldview into action ensured that the organization could consistently "talk politics" in all its endeavors.

By the mid-1990s, the organization had made great strides on the national framing front regarding the public portrayal of domestic violence. In the wake of several high-profile domestic violence cases, made-for-TV movies, and star-studded benefits, domestic violence was positioned as an effective wedge issue that cut across hardening Right–Left divisions. The Family Violence Prevention Fund headed a national public education effort, working hard through the 1990s to frame domestic violence as a public as opposed to a private matter. High visibility had gained recognition of the issue, but much work remained to be done on the grassroots level and in legislative circles.

Changing Media Frames and Routines

When MRAP and RICADV began to collaborate in 1996, we had a running start. Already, RICADV routinely attracted proactive coverage, particularly during Domestic Violence Awareness Month. But all was not rosy. RICADV and other state coalitions across the nation had discovered that, despite media willingness to cover domestic violence awareness events, reporters covering actual incidents of domestic violence ignored the movement's framing of domestic violence as a social problem. Their stories reverted to sensationalized individual framings such as "tragic love goes awry."

In part, such stories represented the institutionalized crime beat tradition that tended to ignore deeper underlying issues. Crime stories about domestic violence routinely suggested that victims were at least partially responsible for their fate. At other times, coverage would focus on the perpetrator's motive, while the victim would disappear. News beats created split coverage: a reporter might sympathetically cover an event sponsored by a domestic violence coalition and yet write a crime story that ignored the movement's framing of domestic violence as social. All these effects were intensified if the victims were poor or working-class women and/or women of color.

At the beginning of our joint effort, RICADV routinely experienced this split-screen coverage: in covering coalition events, the media routinely reported that domestic violence was everyone's business and that help was available. On the front

page and in the evening news, however, these coverage patterns isolated the victim, implying complicity on her part (more than 90 percent of victims in this study were female):

- She was a masochistic partner in a pathological relationship.
- She provoked her batterer.
- She failed to take responsibility for leaving.

Such stories undermined efforts to change policy and consciousness. They portrayed isolated victims struggling for protection while obscuring the social roots of domestic violence.

To address these and other framing issues systematically, RICADV Executive Director Deborah DeBare urged her board to hire a full-time communication coordinator in the spring of 1996. They chose Karen Jeffreys, a seasoned community organizer, who took a movement-building approach to communications. Jeffreys had previously drawn our MRAP group into framing projects on housing and welfare rights.

With MRAP support, she began an effort to make RICADV an indispensable source for news and background information about domestic violence in the Rhode Island media market. Gaining media standing was not an end in itself but a means to promote the reframing of domestic violence as a social problem requiring social solutions. By 2000, RICADV had published a handbook for journalists summarizing recommendations from survivors, reporters, advocates, and MRAP participants. Local journalists actively sought and used it, and it has been widely circulated to similar groups in other states.

To help implement the participatory communications model, Jeffreys worked out an internal process called a "media caucus" to ensure widespread participation in media work. Participants discussed how to respond to inquiries from reporters and how to plan events to carry the message. The media caucus conducted role-playing sessions, in which some participants would take the part of reporters, sometimes hard-ball ones, to give each other practice and training in being a spokesperson on the issue. RICADV encouraged the development and autonomy of SOAR, a sister organization of women who had personally experienced domestic violence. They worked to ensure that the voices of abused women were heard.

The press conference in 2003 was the culmination of years of work with reporters that succeeded in making the conference a "must attend" event for journalists. They had not only learned to trust RICADV and the information it provided but perceived it as an important player. RICADV and SOAR jointly planned the press conference, choosing the setting, talking about what clothes to wear, and planning the order in which people would speak. Without Karen Jeffreys' knowledge, but to her subsequent delight, the two spokespersons from SOAR, Rosa DeCastillo and Jacqueline Kelley, had caucused again and added visual effects, including the tape over the mouths. The planning and support gave the SOAR women the courage and the skills to innovate and helped make the press conference an effective launching pad for the campaign that followed.

Conclusion

Framing matters, but it is not the only thing that matters. There is a danger in "quick fix" politics—the sexy frame as the magic bullet. Framing work is critical, but framing work itself must be framed in the context of movement-building. If those who aim to reframe political debates are to compete successfully against the carriers of official frames, who have lots of resources and organization behind them, they must recognize power inequalities and find ways to challenge them. This requires them to recognize citizens as potential collective actors, not just individual ones.

The participatory communication model appeals to people's sense of agency, encouraging them to develop the capacity for collective action in framing contests. You cannot transform people who feel individually powerless into a group with a sense of collective power by pushing hot buttons. Indeed, you cannot transform people at all. People transform themselves through the work of building a movement—through reflection, critique, dialogue, and the development of relationships and infrastructure that constitute a major reframing effort.

In the spirit of the communication model that we are advocating, it is only fitting to give our

RICADV partners the last words. The collaborative process inside the organization allows them to finish each other's sentences:

> **ALICE:** Each concerned group is a small stream. RICADV's job is to·make the small streams come together, to involve the whole community and make social change for the whole state. And that's our mission—to end domestic violence in Rhode Island. But to do this, all RICADV's work—lobbying, policy, services, public relations—had to come together. We were moving ... (pause)
>
> **KAREN:** ... moving a mountain. As organizers, we think strategically. Organizers think of social justice, and social justice is always about changing systems. So we were trained to read situations differently, to see gaps in institutional layers and links. We saw the potential of ... (pause)
>
> **ALICE:** ... of social justice, of making that change. Whereas a traditional publicist thinks, "Let's get publicity for our organization's work," as organizers, we saw systems and movements. We were definitely going to move the domestic violence issue to another place!
>
> **KAREN:** It's our instinct to ... (pause)
>
> **ALICE:** ... to get the community involved and fix this. We saw a whole movement.

Recommended Resources

David Croteau, William Hoynes, and Charlotte Ryan, eds. *Rhyming Hope and History: Activist, Academics, and Social Movements* (University of Minnesota Press, 2005). Essays on the joys and frustrations involved in collaborations between academics and activists.

George Lakoff. *Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2004). Popularizes many of the most important insights of frame analysis, but implicitly adopts a social-marketing model that ignores movement-building and power inequalities.

Duane M. Oldfield. *The Right and the Righteous: The Christian Right Confronts the Republican Party* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1996). Describes the methodical movement-building process that helped the Christian Right succeed in its reframing effort.

Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence (RICADV). *Domestic Violence: A Handbook for Journalists* (www.ricadv.org, 2000). Offers succinct and practical lessons for journalists on the reporting of domestic violence.

Charlotte Ryan, Michael Anastario, and Karen Jeffreys. "Start Small, Build Big: Negotiating Opportunities in Media Markets." *Mobilization* 10 (2005):111–128. Detailed discussion of how the RICADV built its media capacity and systematic data on how this changed the framing of domestic violence in the Rhode Island media market.