The Bridge Just Beyond: Constructing Communications for Change

Makani Themba

This morning, I open the paper and find the issues I care about in lovely, transparent detail. I understand who is doing what to whom. Who has the power and responsibility. Why it matters. And how it affects me. It is neither all good news nor just bad news. It is news that I can use. There is contact information, pictures, graphs and analysis that help me make full use of what's in its pages.

I walk down to my local breakfast haunt looking forward to mixing it up with my neighbors, and I am not disappointed. The joint is abuzz with conversation about our local policymakers. Folk are talking across tables about what they'll be saying to their electeds at the next council meeting and what they think about the proposed budget. Two friends talk animatedly about a particularly sensitive profile they saw on television about the social change sector. We agree that Channel 7 coverage of the social change beat is usually better than Channel 5's. One friend argues emphatically, "The ethnic papers have always done the better job. We need to increase their share of the Public Media Fund. Independent media, too. They really are the best!"

We nod enthusiastically, sip our tea in contemplation. And then I wake up.

Media today is mostly as far from this as we can imagine. Yet, how it's structured and what it conveys (with our help and urging) is critical to our social change efforts. How do we know what's important? How do we know who is responsible? And whom (or what) do we blame for the current conditions? All of these are fundamental issues in the construction of social change efforts, issues largely framed in mass communications.

Voting is perhaps the most basic way in which many of us are involved in the political process. Those of us who participate in this ritual often do so with some reservation. *Are the candidates really all that different? Do the ads tell us the truth about what this or that proposition will do?* We work through these questions by reading materials, talking through our perceptions with friends and family, and often going by some simple gut reaction to an ad, a photo, the look of a person during their seven seconds of fame in the news.

It is scary how little substantive information we get to support the decisions we, the public, are entrusted to make. If we had, instead, communications infrastructures and content that actually supported and enabled our informed civic participation we would have a markedly different civic life. Communications, of course, is not the entire problem, and it certainly not the same as power, but it occupies an important position at the nexus of power, change and access.

Communications that function to make power relations transparent and provide concrete information on how to get involved are critical to organizing for change. All of the successful movements in this country and elsewhere were able to paint clear pictures of

what was wrong and how it could be different. Civil rights leveraged the grainy images of state violence and abuse to convey that Blacks faced official racism that was unfair, unwarranted -- and something could be done to change it. Building on the success of the movement to end the Vietnam War struggles, the nuclear freeze movement contrasted images of peace and stability with those of fear and destruction to reinforce what was at stake. As a result, they inspired more "regular people" to intervene in foreign policy -- an area that was mostly thought of as "off limits" to public voice, especially prior to Vietnam.

Constructing communications for change necessarily involves work on what we say and convey. And we can always do a better job of crafting clearer, more effective messages. However, we must also understand that our best messages are only as effective as the venues we use to disseminate them. Structure *and* content matter. If we are serious about constructing real communications for change, we have to also pay attention to issues like media ownership, diversity, and bias in coverage because the media terrain is changing.

With less than a dozen companies owning most of the world's major media outlets, the role of ethnic and alternative media in providing access to our messages is more important than ever. After years of frustration with less than satisfactory coverage, a number of groups are walking away from mainstream media and making their own. Groups like Oakland, California based Third World Majority and the international stable of Independent Media Centers are taking progressive stories direct to people over the Internet and in community gatherings.

Independent media initiatives often help bring people together and remind us that there are other like-minded folk that share our sense of outrage and our vision. They are a great example of how the way we communicate can help build and sustain community. Communications not only conveys ideas, it shapes our perception of our power or sense of powerlessness. It can help build a sense of shared destiny or balkanize us into competing factions. If independent media provides an example of the role of communications as unifying force, communications on poverty provides a potent example of how the dominant framing of the issue has been divisive.

Framing Poverty

Income is consistently a great predictor of support for initiatives to address poverty. Traditionally, the higher one's income, the less likely one will be supportive, the lower one's income, the more likely. However, this is changing. Support of anti-poverty initiatives by lower income people has dropped, ranging from four to ten percentage points in most polls (even in European polls), as part of a several-year trend in erosion of support.

Much of this drop may be explained by a coincidental drop in respondents' belief in the systemic (versus individual) nature of poverty. It is no coincidence that welfare and other similar social programs were catalyzed by the "Great Depression." The Depression taught many the cruelties of the market and the millions with direct experience of its inadequacies knew that poverty was more than individual failing. The American memory of the Depression is fading and many of the people who lived through the Depression as adults

have now passed on. There are fewer of us with an understanding of what makes people poor, which is important as support for anti-poverty programs is highest among those who have a structural or systemic understanding of poverty and the economy. Support also goes up among the general population when there are certain economic "events" (i.e., awareness of inflation in the late 1970s and early 80s, local plant shutdowns, etc.) that remind people of the vagaries of the market.

Where are we to go for an understanding of how the economy works? School? The news media? News coverage of the economy is more like a sports event than the set of multi-faceted systems in which we live and make our living. It is boiled down to winners and losers, stocks and bonds, and occasional data pieces that rarely go beyond what happened last month, much less five or even ten-year trends. Without a sense of the patterns, or any context or explanation of the policies that shape who is poor and why, there is a vacuum of analysis. And our opponents are ready to fill that vacuum with well-known stories of individual striving and failed character.

This trend is exacerbated by efforts on the right and the left to frame economic interests as moral issues. The right uses morality to get people to separate from their economic interests. “Gay marriage” is used to trump concern about decent wages. People disconnect from their class interests to create new alliances that are less threatening to our current social structures. The left attempts to co-opt the right’s morality frame and “shift” it. We say, “Well, if you care about morality then poverty is a moral issue.” We echo the disconnection between poverty and systemic failing. We don’t help build solidarity or deeper understanding of why there is poverty in the first place.

What the right understands is that, on the whole, most of us want to help others in need. When we are comfortable with the "deservingness" of the recipients, our support increases dramatically. For example, polls asking respondents if they would support efforts to "feed the hungry" is much more likely to be greeted affirmatively than support for the food stamp program. One connotes helping deserving human beings. The other, government waste.

It is extremely seductive, then, to figure out how to make our issues "soft and cuddly." Throw up pictures of adorable children, hard working moms trying to get by, etc., in hopes that we can prove our constituents are deserving and worthy of support. We are afraid to use our precious time at the mic with analysis and context. We think there is a fundamental conflict between providing context and promulgating compassion.

Yet, compassion is more easily generated when we understand the "why" behind the problem. Stories about the plant closing, messages that help us connect unequal school funding to unequal employment, and help us connect the dots between policies and outcomes help us convey more human and humane portraits of social problems.

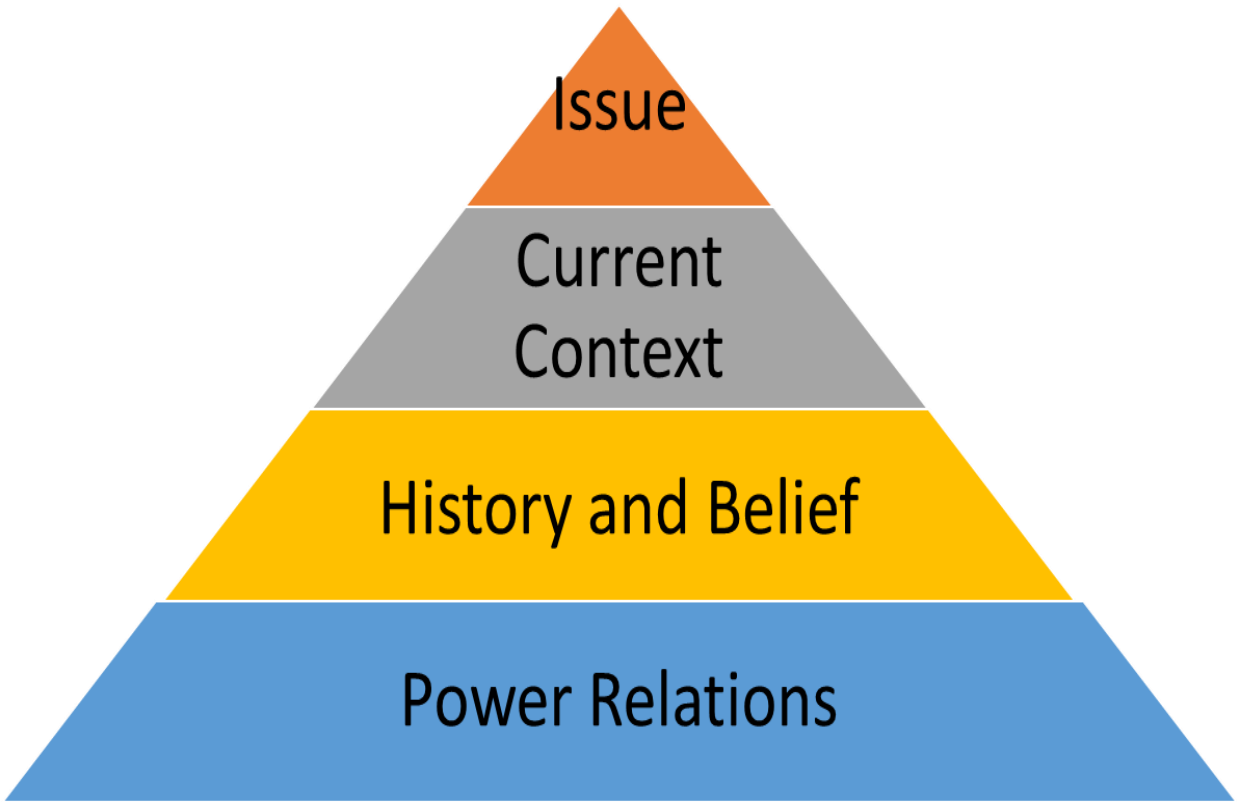
Individualistic values (framed as individual responsibility) are strongly correlated with opposition to anti-poverty initiatives. The stronger a person holds these values, the more likely they are to oppose any public initiative to address poverty or other social issues. The

truth is that it doesn't help for us to reinforce these "individual/victim blaming" frames with triumphant individual stories of our own. We've got to be consistent in our telling of the structural and institutional roots of these problems -- as a foundation for why we are advocating institution-focused solutions.

Reframing is More Than Words

Often, we think of changing the frame as changing another's mind or opinion and we are taught to believe that the work of convincing is largely done through words. We endeavor to think of the most clever, affective ways to communicate complicated ideas – one sound bite at a time. However, frames are created over time by multiple venues and institutions that help us make meaning.

School teaches us what is "fact" and what is considered important to know. We are passed, failed, rewarded based on these priorities and we internalize not only the words but the sum total of their meaning. Our faith institutions teach us what is truth and set priorities in different and overlapping ways in relationship to school. Work provides context and meaning regarding frames as well as literature, popular culture and other places. As a result, we can not expect break through centuries of framing and association with sound bites alone. A long term communications strategy must also include shifting what is taught about our issues and examining the underlying beliefs that sustain the negative frames over time. The chart below explores how these frames are created.



The current issue, like for example, immigrant rights is not only shaped by today's news coverage. It is shaped by resource issues, our understanding of geography, economics (especially how jobs are created and made available) and racial formation (who is the "other", who is dangerous, lazy, etc.) Reframing immigration will take work to shift perception throughout the pyramid in order to make fundamental change. For example, in addition to identifying break through messages, we will also need to build the popular understanding of economics and geography so that more people understand how labor and capital work in a global context.

Hope Works

There are many lessons from this last election cycle for communicators. One important one is the power of communicating hope that something can be done. At Praxis, we have long encouraged advocates to stop focusing their communications on restating problems (why and what's wrong) and shift toward solutions (what can be done and how).

Our issues may be on the side of the angels but not often on the side of corporate interests and dollars. Therefore, we depend on public support and people power to move our agenda. Having a base of support is a good thing, not only because it helps us win, but because we are committed to democracy and principles that those most affected should lead the work of articulating solutions to "the problem". Building this base requires motivating people to act, to believe that they can make a difference. In fact, much of social change communications is to allies and potential allies in hopes that they will join us and join us more actively.

This work of moving people to action (especially those hardest hit) is getting increasingly difficult. Demographic and economic trends make lasting relationships difficult and therefore, trust is hard to build. Many people have become cynical about whether there is anything much they can do. A concerted effort by the right to delegitimize social change organizations and the independent sector in general has made it harder for the public to trust us. People feel vulnerable and hurt when their nonprofit organizations go bad. And they are hesitant to trust their hearts, their time and their dollars to groups in the wake of increasing coverage of "bad" groups.

Government programs are faring even worse. The right's relentless attack on government as a positive agent for change has resulted in deep erosion of support for social programs. They pimp the sacred work ethic as well as national fears of "being taken advantage of" by the undeserving poor to effectively smear even programs serving mothers and infants. There is less and less hope that things can change. There is less and less hope that we can change them and that this crisis in hope is driven by our decreasing hope and faith in humanity -- especially human beings that look differently than we do.

Race, or more accurately racism, is driving a lot of our policy discussions these days. The right is illustrating their story about social problems with images of black and brown people. They work to reinforce stereotypes and help make us (including people of color) more comfortable with the notion that "those people" and therefore "those problems" are

beyond solution. After all, if the not so subtle message is that the problem is our culture and if race and culture are interchangeable and therefore equally "fixed", what on earth can be done?

A media content analysis by We Interrupt This Message confirmed these findings. The analysis (done in 2000) uncovered a deep and profound schizophrenia in America concerning race and equity. On one hand, fairness is an important value and anything that is successfully framed as "unfair" will be met with significant public opposition. On the other, whether conscious or not, this country has firmly connected race with human potential. Much of the coverage of welfare and education are grounded in and shaped by widely-held beliefs in white supremacy -- and the inferiority of people of color. Article after article describes racial differences in achievement without referring to racism, privilege, or bias as a possible explanation for these differences. The primary explanation offered for these differences is *the culture or capacity* for each "racial group" to excel.

The two poles between belief in fairness and belief in racial inferiority mark off interesting terrain for our work. We must successfully work the fairness frame and do a better job of documenting impact and bias in institutional practice. And we must also work to help people see across race to value all human beings as worthy of faith, hope and development. Most people want to believe this but tend not to see the many experiences they have that validate this belief. They surrender to the steady drum of hopelessness in the media and in our personal conversations each day.

Building hope, then, is our primary task as change communicators.

But how do we communicate *hope*? It is not Polly Anna, pie in the sky language or great oratory that inspires hope (although a stirring speech won't hurt). It is helping people understand the nitty gritty details of what they can do to make a difference that's within their means and imagining. There are two primary misconceptions that get in the way of effectively communicating these details.

Misconception 1: Most people don't know nearly as much as we do. Effective communication begins with a clear understanding of how much the people we are talking to know and the many non-traditional ways they know it. An effective message speaks to people in their own idiom, their most familiar, even intimate way of speaking. It requires a healthy respect and understanding of the incredible experience our "audience" brings to bear. Knowing this requires that we listen at least twice as often as we speak.

Misconception 2: We must communicate more information on "the problem." The more they see how bad it is, the more likely they are to act. People are rarely shocked into action. Most of us are fairly jaded by now and have already assumed the worst. So it's no surprise that the media effects research confirms that it is practical information on what they can do about an issue versus the severity of a problem that moves us. Not that we don't need to communicate that our issue is a serious one -- we do. We've just got to make sure that we don't leave it at that. Besides, oftentimes our audience already knows that the problem is serious before we begin.

Bottomline: *Talking about the problem is much less important than offering understandable solutions.* Or put another way, concrete action is more important than education though both are necessary.

In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (Yale University Press, 1990), James Scott examines over one thousand years of rebellion among the oppressed. His research asserts the existence of what he describes as the *hidden transcript*; private discourse among the marginalized that takes place out of the view of the dominant class. This transcript, according to Scott, is comprised of the stories, actions, jokes, fantasies, dreams, and plain speaking of the subordinated that are not "safe" to say to those in power.

This "transcript" unfolds in church repasts, on busses, in temples and hair salons and in our own livingrooms. We can find it in the lyrics of hip-hop or scrawled on bathroom walls. Although people are not talking about data and theory in the supermarket line, they often already possess an awareness and analysis of the social issues that affect their lives. It's not that disfranchised communities don't know about, for example, police brutality or poor quality schools. It's not even that these communities don't know they are serious problems. In fact, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that these are common topics in conversations taking place away from the surveillance of those "outside" of these communities. Therefore, what is key to motivating people to act is not giving them information but validating their perceptions *and conveying a sense that the change they dare to imagine in these private spaces is achievable and desired by a great many others.*

This "validation" occurs when an individual or group "breaks out" and publicly articulates the hidden transcript. This moment of "unveiling" is crucial, as it gives previously isolated groups a context and sense that a majority shares their beliefs. As Scott writes, "The process, then, is more one of recognizing close relatives of one's hidden transcript rather than of filling essentially empty heads with novel ideas."

Good messages are affective -- they touch us emotionally. They are effective -- they convey what we need them to. And they connect with shared dreams and beliefs. They surface the *hidden transcript* of our power and agency. They surface the possibilities and promise of our coming together.

Too much of how we communicate for "change" is really little more than communicating problems. We spend a great deal of time gathering the evidence and measuring the dimensions of the issue and not nearly enough time thinking about what can be done and how people can make a difference. Sure, there are those of us who do the important work of crafting legislation but even there we often say, "Here's this really bad problem that this law will fix so please write a letter to Washington to support it." The link between problem and solution is not often clearly made. When we make the link, we get more letters, which is a good thing. However, we also have to figure out ways of more deeply engaging people in the act of making change beyond writing letters to a group of people (policymakers) in which they often have little faith.

Communicating the concrete "handle" or "what can be done" is critical as it helps those who are normally outside the process understand what they can do to have more power inside the process. It requires that our communication strategies be integrated into our action strategies. And we have to know something about what we are doing about an issue in order to engage others to join us.

Of course, providing concrete venues for involvement and effective, clear messaging is only part of the challenge. People have to have faith in our ability to "pull it off" before they will join us and, as explored previously, the right's attack on the public and independent sectors have hurt our credibility in this regard. And it's not just in the news. Virtually every media portrayal of activism in the context of organizations is fraught with negative stereotypes. Organizers are often portrayed in film as shallow, insensitive and ineffective and the only way real change happens is when we "go it alone." Even the stories we tell each other as organizers are not much better. And this has got to change because integral to effectively communicating for change is effectively communicating *the credibility of our institutions* as viable change agents.

Blocking the Echo

All of these challenges point to the fundamental need for us to join forces and tackle these mega communications challenges collaboratively. We need to reinforce and echo messages that advance notions of shared humanity and destiny, encourage and support community involvement, strengthen our faith in the public and independent sectors, and set higher standards and higher expectations for the institutional actors in our lives.

Unfortunately, we don't often have complete control over our work and how we do it. We must craft our efforts so that we can attract investors (most usually foundations), which often engenders certain ways of working -- especially in these times of funding cuts. One way funding restrictions can limit our ability to create echo across issues is the increasing promulgation of categorical or issue-focused work.

META MESSAGES

Ours	Theirs
IT'S THE SYSTEM - Poverty and other economic problems are systemic, not natural.	**IT'S "SOME" PEOPLE** - Poverty is the result of lack of initiative; individual failing.
WE ALL DESERVE GOOD - All human beings are basically connected and deserve the same things.	**THOSE "OTHER" FOLK CAN'T HANDLE GOOD** – And trying to do them good will only hurt your good. Negative perceptions of the "other". Only a few people are worthy.

GOVERN TOGETHER - Public/government is a good place to handle social issues for the common good and for public/institutional accountability. People can and should govern together.	**ONLY "LEADERS" CAN GOVERN -** Government is ineffective. Collaboration is messy. Governance should go to the few "leaders".
WE ARE PART OF THE WORLD – as global citizens we are interconnected and responsible for each other. We have much to learn from other nations.	**USA RULES –** We tell others what to do and when to do it and there's nothing they can teach *us*.

Can Communications Do All That?

As fundamental as it is, communications is no panacea. It is not the silver bullet that will take out our opposition. In fact, communications work that is not connected to an overall strategy can actually hurt our efforts. Think of it as a mic. It simply amplifies what you do. If you have dumb things to say, you still sound dumb, only louder. When part of a coordinate strategy, it can be a powerful weapon in a comprehensive arsenal that includes base building, policy change, research, and capacity building.

Building a body of effective communications for change will require more collaboration, less categorical work and yes, more money. Not for more big-ticket research and mega polls but for small scale listening projects, planning time and capacity building for those on the frontlines to get what they need to grab and hold the mic as part of an overall effort to hold the policy agenda. We have to be more rigorous in our efforts to evaluate our communications for change. This will mean going beyond measuring coverage to assess what, if anything, was actually changed. Are more people involved? Is there more hope in the possibility of change? What are we conveying that expands the notion of what's possible?

This will, in turn, surface a new set of practices that will mean more investment in strategies that reach and engage our constituents and less on press conferences and other made for TV spectacle. For example, we might increase support for members in their personal communication with friends and family by giving them talking points on how to explain the issues to people in their lives and providing safe spaces to practice because we understand that personal communication is critical to moving people into action. We will have the tenacity to find what's working, what's not and what we are really learning out there. And this work will engender learning communities that are non-competitive and collaborative so that the sum of our work together will be greater than our individual efforts.

Bertol Brecht once wrote, "Whoever wants to fight lies and ignorance today, whoever wants to speak the truth must surmount at least five difficulties. (S)He must have the courage to speak the truth when it is everywhere stifled; the intelligence to recognize it

when it is everywhere hidden; the art to make it manageable like a weapon; the judgement to choose who will know how to make it effective; and finally enough guile to make them understand it." This is the potential and power of communication for social change. This is the work we must do to make it happen. These are the standards to which we must hold ourselves accountable if we are to realize our vision of a fair, just world.

Sometime in the future…

She walked across the stage so regal in her cap and gown that I hardly recognized her as my once gangly granddaughter. In one hand was her diploma, the other her completed voter registration form -- a requirement of graduation. She was ready to join the community as a full adult. Her civic classes trained her well on the ins and outs of how change is made. And she was ready to be a thorn in her representative's side. I smiled. She is her mother's child.

I looked back over the years and sacrifices that brought us to this moment. The patient organizing by so many that helped folk realize that they could make a difference. Through these efforts came new laws and institutions designed to serve and engage us: schools that taught young people to be active partners in their government; policies that guaranteed equitable funding and social programs; and communities built for people to talk with one another -- and with the new labor laws, there was actually time.

It was a long hard fight and those rightwingers gave us a real run before we finally moved them out and put in some real democracy. Not that things are perfect. No way. But I can see the difference everywhere and it gives me deep and abiding hope.