



SECTION TWO

SHAPING THE STORY**USING FRAMING, MESSAGING AND STORYTELLING TO TELL *YOUR* TRUTH**

BEFORE DEVELOPING YOUR TACTICS, you have to determine the tale you will tell. One story can be told in many different ways—your challenge is to figure out how to craft communication so that it taps into shared values; links problems and solutions; educates the media, policy makers and the public; and wins allies and champions. In sum, you need to know how to frame and you need to know how to message.

Framing is the art and science of organizing information in a way that connects to what people already think, aligns with what they already know and helps them see new ideas in a context that acknowledges and builds on their values. Messaging is connecting those shared values to the change you want to see in the world. And storytelling? That's crafting a narrative that can amplify voices and uproot power dynamics, creating a common tale that resonates with your audience.

This section guides you through it all.

HOW THE FRAME MAKES THE ISSUE

By Loren Siegel

MEDIA ACTIVISTS understand the media's power to influence the way people think about the issues that affect their lives. The mass media plays a huge role in shaping how people think about social issues. It is a mediator of meaning—telling us what to think about and how to think about it. Sociologist William Gamson of the Media Research and Action Project at Boston College has written, “Media is an arena of contest in its own right, and part of a larger strategy of social change.”

Using the media to move an issue from relative obscurity to broad public understanding and action requires a well thought-out communications strategy. Marshalling public support for any given reform will depend on how successful we are at defining the problem in the first place: At its most fundamental level, what's really at stake? Why does it matter? Who are the heroes, who are the villains and what are the solutions?

Framing is the process of using strategic communications to shape a narrative that the public adopts as its own.

Framing Basics

Journalist and scholar Walter Lippman (who coined the term “cold war”) referred to frames as “the pictures in our heads.” When we hear the word “rat,” for example, we have an immediate negative association that can't be dislodged easily, which is why rat is such an enduring metaphor for the lowest of the low—backstabber, betrayer, sneak, snitch.

The Frameworks Institute, a leader in working with nonprofit organizations to communicate more effectively with the public, describes frames as “mental shortcuts to make sense of the world.” As we go through our day, we have to process mountains of incoming information quickly, so we rely on cues within that new information to signal how to connect it with what we already know, think and believe. We unconsciously “file” incoming information into

a frame—good or bad, liberal or conservative, safe or dangerous, important or unimportant. That frame then exerts a lot of influence over how we think and feel about a given issue.

Framing for Social Change

Effective framing is critical to mounting a winning campaign. Framing allows you to establish the “meaning” of an issue and puts your opposition on the defensive. By crafting language based on how people think about issues, advocates can garner support from broad and diverse constituencies. This will lead to the kind of media coverage that can push your issue to the forefront of the public discourse and set the public policy agenda.

Social scientists and linguists have created a hierarchy of frames that are relevant to public policy issues, with the higher-level frames acting as a kind of template or container that the lower-level frames fit into. Frameworks Institute's Levels of Understanding lays it out this way:

LEVEL ONE FRAMES: Big ideas, like freedom, justice, community, success, prevention, responsibility.

LEVEL TWO FRAMES: Issue-types, like environment, child care (or media reform).

LEVEL THREE FRAMES: Specific issues, like rainforests, earned income tax credits (or net neutrality).

By developing messages that trigger Level One frames, advocates can use their access to the media to influence how millions of people think about an issue. By skipping directly to Level Two, we will end up speaking to a much smaller audience—mostly those who are already concerned about our topic. And if we go right to Level Three, we may be preaching only to the choir of policy wonks, activists and others already engaged in battle.

Framing's basic truth is this: The person who defines the issue and sets the terms of the debate is halfway to winning.

Why? Because values trump facts: We can pour on fact after fact in an effort to persuade the public to support net neutrality, but if the dominant frame through which the public sees this issue is that “it’s bad for business,” even our most compelling facts will fail to convince many people. To return to an earlier example, if you heard that *in fact*, rats are actually quite clean and are very attached to their young, would that make you like rats?

We don’t think so...



FRAME WITH YOUR VALUES IN MIND

If frames are the structural underpinnings of your communications machine, values are its fuel. Understanding the values embedded in what we believe, what we stand for and what kind of society we want to live in is an essential part of developing your frame. Your frame’s values point audiences toward the actions you propose.

Here is a sample of commonly held values in the US:

- Accountability
- Civic participation
- Compassion
- Courage
- Creativity
- Democracy
- Dignity
- Discipline
- Diversity
- Equal opportunity
- Faith
- Family
- Freedom
- Generosity
- Health
- Happiness
- Honesty
- Hope
- Independence
- Justice
- Making a better life
- Personal responsibility
- Self-interest
- Self-expression
- Self-reliance
- Tradition
- Work

—The SPIN Project

Values are more important than facts. A frame that conveys compelling values will trump even the most convincing counterargument.

Understanding Public Opinion

DOING SOME PRELIMINARY public opinion research will help you identify winning frames and messages. You can check out the extensive polling resources on the Web to get a sense of how the public feels about the media and media reform. For example, the Gallup Poll has been asking the following question since 1972:

In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the mass media—such as newspapers, TV and radio—when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately and fairly?

	GREAT DEAL	FAIR AMOUNT	NOT VERY MUCH	NONE AT ALL
2007	9 %	38 %	35 %	17 %
1997	10 %	43 %	31 %	15 %
1976	18 %	54 %	22 %	4 %

Evidently, confidence in the news media has diminished, not grown, over the past 30 years. Americans have a love-hate relationship with the news media. When asked how much confidence they have in a list of major institutions, televisions news and newspapers are ranked below public schools and the medical system.

Media reform advocates can tap into the public’s disappointment in the media to make their case that the mass media needs to be reformed if it is to fulfill its responsibilities in our democracy: to keep the government honest, to give diverse voices a platform and to accurately and fully report the issues of the day so that an informed public can exercise its basic democratic rights.

The Conservative Frame

IT’S ALSO HELPFUL to identify how the opposition is attempting to frame the issue you’re working on. You can usually figure this out by looking at your opponents’ messages in public statements, like press releases and quotes in the media.

The Web site of the conservative think tank the American Enterprise Institute, for example, has a special section on “Telecommunications and Information Technology.” A review of the content pretty quickly reveals how conservatives are talking to their audiences about media reform:

- Regulation is bad for business.
- Regulation impedes technological innovation.
- Net neutrality is “bad economics.”

The Heritage Foundation, another conservative think tank, dismisses the issue of media concentration as “a myth.”:

- There’s more diversity in the media than ever.
- Regulation endangers choice.
- Existing regulations are obsolete and should be abolished.

Boiled down to its essence, the conservative frame is that media reform is Big Government—a frame that conservatives have used quite effectively for years to win public support for cutting social programs and limiting government oversight—and is therefore Bad for America.

BASIC FRAMING REMINDERS

Framing is about clarifying and promoting values. Proactive framing means offering a positive vision for your campaign: Be *for* something, not just against something.

Do not reinforce your opposition’s frames. Repeating their frames reinforces their definition of the issue, thus supporting their point of view.

Activists sometimes create “myths and facts” information sheets in an attempt to dispel the opposition’s claims head-on. But here’s the problem: Conservatives often rely on deeply held stereotypes to make their points, and restating these stereotypes only gives them new life. Think back to the rat example—would a fact sheet that started out “Myth: rats are dirty” help our cause?

—The SPIN Project

Framing Media Reform

BILL MOYERS, one of the country's leading thinkers and communicators on the issue of media democracy, says that "There is no more important struggle for American democracy than ensuring a diverse, independent and free media." "Democracy," "diversity," "independence" and "freedom" are Level One frames that we can use to contest the conservative frame. This is a good place to start. By framing media reform as a question of **preserving democracy and freedom**, we begin from a position of strength that is positive rather than reactive. It's a frame that's big and broad enough to embrace all of the media reform movement's specific policy concerns.

This **CORNERSTONE OF DEMOCRACY** frame taps into the public's support for the values embedded in the First Amendment and the belief that our democratic society cannot flourish without a free and unbiased media and a well-informed citizenry. It is true that the public has many criticisms of the media today. But at the same time, most Americans understand the importance of the media's role in creating transparency and holding those in power responsible for their actions.

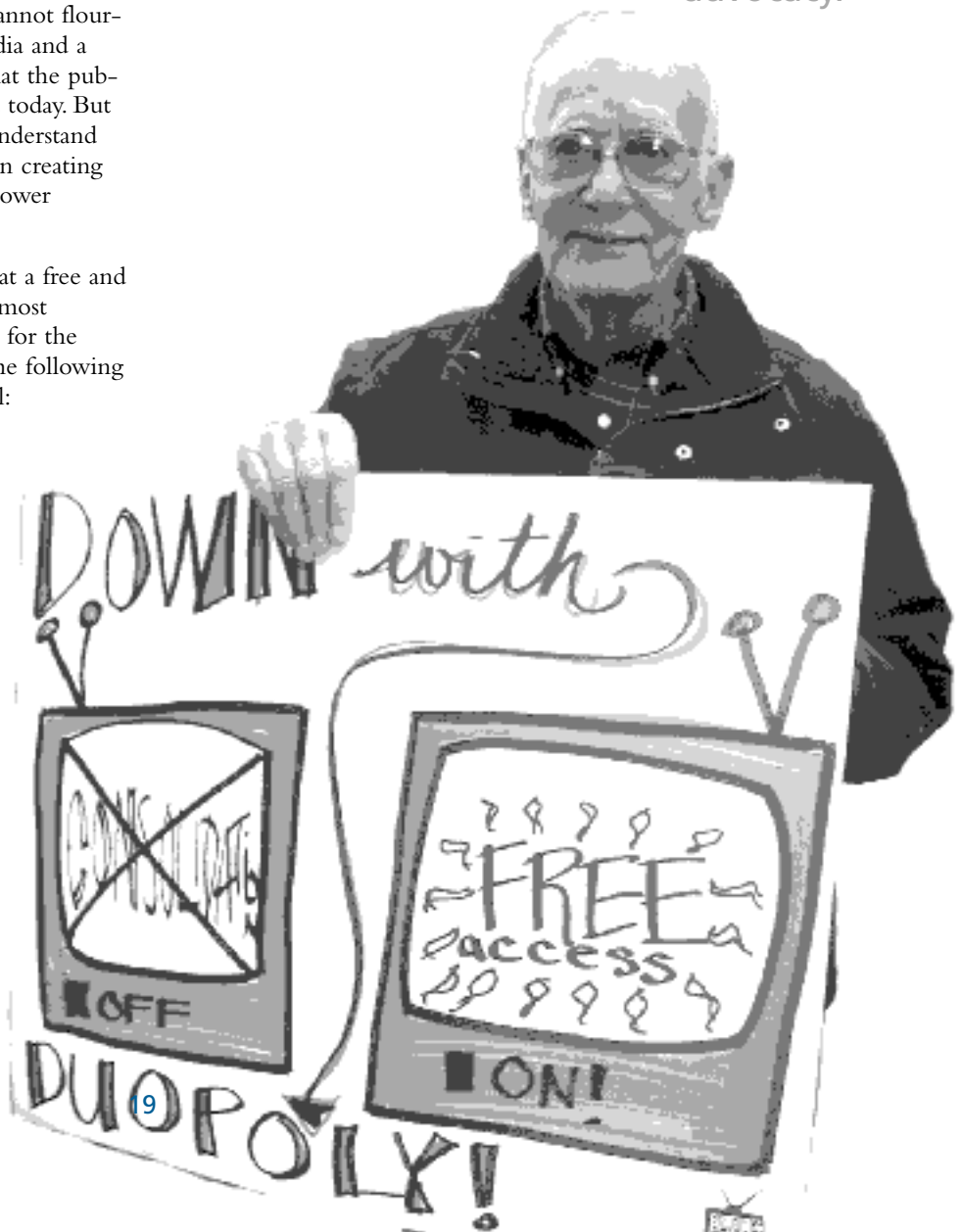
Some recent polling results show that a free and independent media is important to most Americans. A Pew Research Center for the People and the Press survey asked the following question in its 2006 nationwide poll:

Q. Which is more important to you—that the government be able to censor news stories it feels threaten national security OR that the news media be able to report stories they feel are in the national interest?

Government able to censor	34%
News media able to report	56%

Although a substantial minority chose government censorship, the public is much more supportive of a free news media today than it was in 1991 when this question was first asked. At that time the responses were reversed, with 58% in favor of government censorship and only 32% in favor of a free media.

Tap into the public's support for core values such as democracy, freedom and transparency to create a proactive frame for media advocacy.



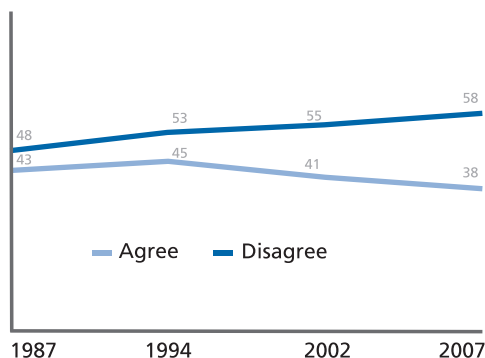
Outside the Seattle FCC hearing.

Other Frames to Consider

CORPORATE POWER VERSUS CONSUMER RIGHTS:

This frame taps into the public's belief that major corporations in this country already have too much power and its general post-Enron disillusionment with big business. The depth of this disillusionment was revealed in recent polls. According to the Pew Research Center's report "Trends in Political Values and Core Attitudes: 1987-2007," the idea that corporations make too much profit is now more widely shared—and more strongly expressed—than a few years ago. While 65% agree that corporations make too much profit, 30% *strongly* agree. This is the highest percentage expressing complete agreement with this statement in 20 years. The chart below shows a growing cynicism about corporate America:

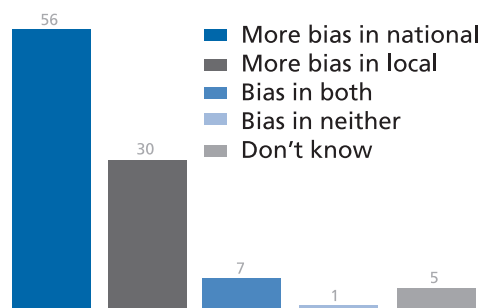
Q. Do you agree or disagree with this statement: Business corporations generally strike a fair balance between profits and the public interest.



Loren Siegel is a consultant specializing in communications and strategic planning for social justice organizations. From 1991–2001 she served as Director of Public Education for the American Civil Liberties Union and built an integrated communications program for the organization and its state affiliates.

LOCAL NEWS MATTERS: This frame taps into the public's strong desire for, and belief in, local news coverage. According to research commissioned by the Media and Democracy Coalition, "thorough coverage of local news" ranks second among the characteristics Americans associate with quality news (behind only "availability of thorough, accurate information"). And as the chart below shows, twice as many people think there is more bias in national news coverage than in local news coverage. The consolidation of media ownership in the hands of fewer and fewer large multinational corporations undermines the public's preference for local ownership and local content.

Bias in national and local news coverage



DIVERSITY MATTERS: This frame taps into the widespread belief that diversity is one of America's greatest assets. Terms like "a nation of immigrants," "melting pot" and "American mosaic" celebrate our diversity. Universities and colleges strive for diversity and the public is largely supportive of those efforts. For communities of color and other under-represented groups, media diversity is a civil right issue. Discrimination prevented people of color from obtaining licenses in the early days of radio and television, and in spite of progress, unequal access to the media is still a fact of life in America.

TO FRAME, CONSIDER THESE QUESTIONS

WHILE IT'S TRUE that framing is an art that can take years to master, no organization can afford to ignore it, and anyone can begin to create a solid frame right now. The exercise below is much more useful when more than one brain is involved, so work with a colleague or friend. For fresh ideas, discuss the questions with people unfamiliar with your issue. Later, you can edit these ideas down to a sharp strategic frame.

Warmup. What is your issue really about, in personal terms to you? In policy terms? In terms of local history? In terms of your political environment? In broad national or international historical terms? In personal terms to your target audience?

Who is affected? Framing for widest reach and drama allows you to show the broad impact of media issues on many people, not just on selected parts of a community.

What values will your frame use to engage target audiences? *For a list of commonly held values, see page 17.*

Who are the players? Most frames will have a good vs. bad aspect to them: hero vs. villain, the Force vs. the Dark Side. People are accustomed to choosing sides on issues. This is your chance to cast these roles as you see fit.

What's the story? What happened? Summarize the story that sets up your frame by describing five critical episodes in two sentences each.

What pictures/images communicate the frame? Images and symbols can be critical to conveying the story that you want to tell. Find images that convey the values behind media reform and media justice.

Powerful data. What data support your frame? Put your data in terms of “human” or “social” math. For instance, say, “from Dubuque to Denver, at any given moment one in four viewers is watching the same canned news being delivered all over the country,” not, “Big Bad Media Conglomerate XYZ owns 25% of all local news outlets.”

What media hooks does this frame contain?

Media hooks attract a reporter's attention and make sense of an issue in their language. Possible hooks include:

- Current national event.
- Trends. Three examples can constitute a “trend.”
- Anniversaries of events related to media reform, such as FCC or Supreme Court rulings, legislation, major milestones in news or entertainment programming.
- Controversy.
- New finding that runs counter to conventional wisdom.
- Name recognition. If you have a recognized name associated with your event or endorsing your work.
- Local hook to a national event.
- Human interest. Personal stories of individuals or community leaders with fascinating stories.
- Unlikely bedfellows. Are people or groups who are usually opposed to an issue joining together on something?

Know Your Enemy

Your ideal frame probably differs in many ways from how your campaign or issue is currently framed in your target audience's mind. What elements of the current frame do you want to dissolve, and which will you reinforce? Consider the dominant frame in your target audience's mind, as well as your opponent's frame (these can be the same or different).

The Big Picture

How will the frame affect your work and the work of your allies beyond your immediate campaign? Briefly describe how the frame brings you towards your long-term goals in the next five years and 20 years.

—The SPIN Project

MAKING MESSAGES THAT MATTER

By Loren Siegel

MESSAGE DEVELOPMENT is how you fill the canvas within your frame. An effective message is more than the marshalling of facts and arguments. The job of the message is to link an idea (e.g., a policy you are supporting or opposing) to a familiar and widely held belief (the frame), so that your audience will hear it, understand it, get it and be moved to action. There are a few basic guidelines to remember as you work on developing your messages.

Guideline One: Know Your Audience

Different frames and messages will resonate with different audiences. If you are appearing on a local TV news program, you might want to tap into the Local News Matters frame with a message that emphasizes the impact that media consolidation has on the delivery of local news to the community. If you are

writing commentary for a blog dedicated to racial justice, you may want to use the Diversity Matters frame and focus on how net neutrality is the best way to ensure that all voices and opinions have a say.

Guideline Two: Repeat, Repeat, Repeat

It's not only okay to use the same messages over and over again—it's in your issue's interest to do so. Repeating your key messages is the only way to get them into the public consciousness. The message pipeline carries messages through a cycle, from advocates to allies, who repeat the same message to influencers, who repeat it in the media and in community outreach. With enough of this “echo effect,” your messages and your frames come to define the public's perception of an issue.

AUDIENCE AWARENESS

Media activists can test the effectiveness of messages through polls, focus groups, interviews and research. These can gauge the mood and attitudes of intended audiences. They are supports—not substitutes—for the focused advocacy, policy and communications work that is needed to win campaigns.

Polling gauges public perception of an issue over time or in a moment.

Surveys ask in-depth questions and seek to get a deeper understanding of a particular issue.

Focus groups assemble people for discussion and feedback on a particular issue.

Research is the most important way to understand attitudes and types of media messages permeating the media landscape. The Pew Research Center [www.pewresearch.org] offers information on trends, attitudes and issues in American society, particularly related to how we consume the media.

Other public opinion resources on the Web:

Gallup Poll: www.gallup.com

New American Media:
news.newamericamedia.org/news/

Public Agenda: www.publicagenda.org

The Roper Center:
www.roper-center.ucon.edu

Polling Report: www.pollingreport.com

—The SPIN Project

Guideline Three: Don't Reinforce Your Opponent's Message

This rule was the theme of *Don't Think of an Elephant!*—the popular book by linguist George Lakoff. The example he used was a speech given by Richard Nixon when he was under pressure to resign during the Watergate scandal. He stood before the nation on TV and said, “I am not a crook.” And from then on, everybody thought of him as a crook. If the opposition's message is that, “the Internet Freedom Preservation Act is bad economics that will make the US less competitive in the global economy,” we should not respond with the message, “the Internet Freedom Preservation Act is not bad economics and it will not make the US less competitive in the global economy.” Our message has to invoke a different frame that leads the audience on an entirely different path to the solution we believe in.

Guideline Four: Stay on Message

This rule is especially important in the context of media outreach. Getting your message into the media is the most efficient and cost-effective way to communicate with potentially millions of people. It's crucial to use your access to the media in a strategic way. And it's more important to get your message across than to answer the precise question posed by the reporter. Even when asked about a specific policy detail, you should always include your core message in your answer. If a reporter asks you to comment on a bad FCC rule, remember to connect your answer to your core message:

Question: How do you plan to challenge the FCC's media ownership rule?

Answer: *The FCC's media ownership rule undermines the free, vibrant and diverse media so important to our democratic way of life. Right now we are considering our options for challenging this anti-democratic rule.*

Guideline Five: Problem/Solution/Action

The SPIN Project recommends a three-part format for message development—the Problem, the Solution and the Action. This format helps you develop short, pithy “talking points,” that move to the essence of an issue, rather than jargon-filled lectures that only your closest allies understand.

Problem

This section of the message should frame the issue clearly, broadly and in a compelling way so that the need for media reform is felt and understood by everyone, especially those not familiar with the issue. This section defines the issue, who is affected, who is causing the problem and who is responsible for correcting it.

Solution:

This part of the message should convey your values. What do you stand for? What is your vision for solving the problem? The solution helps you convey viable alternatives for success. It offers a positive vision, not just a response to the opposition. You want to convey a sense of hope and possibility in your message so that your audience will believe that change is achievable and within reach.

Action:

Your call to action provides leadership to your audience and gives them a sense of what they can do to solve the problem and help achieve the solution. Actions should be tailored to specific audiences, based on the best way to influence your target.

Consistency is the key to effective messaging. Stay on message, stay proactive and say it over and over again.

EFFECTIVE MESSAGES

BELOW ARE THREE EXAMPLES of real-life media reform messages that effectively define the Problem, frame the Solution using core values and point towards Actions to solve the stated problem.

Example One: Craig Aaron, Communications Director of Free Press

Issue: Net neutrality

Target audience: Public radio listeners

Frames: Corporate power versus consumer rights; Cornerstone of Democracy

Problem

We've got the phone and cable companies dominating 96% of the residential market. Now these big phone and cable companies are trying to become gatekeepers on the Internet too. That poses a threat to the free and open Internet as we know it.

Solution

Every major consumer group in the country has come out for "net neutrality," which means genuine competition for our broadband dollar. That's how consumers are going to benefit: more choices, faster speeds, lower prices and more access.

Action

The US Senate's Dorgan/Snowe Bill creates clear, enforceable net neutrality regulations. Support the Dorgan/Snowe Bill and keep the Internet the open, level playing field it's always been.

Example Two: Preamble to the Media and Democracy Coalition's Bill of Media Rights

Issue: Media consolidation

Target audience: The engaged public

Frame: Cornerstone of Democracy

Problem

A free and vibrant media, full of diverse and competing voices, is the lifeblood of America's democracy and culture, as well as an engine of growth for its economy. Yet in recent years, massive and unprecedented corporate consolidation has dangerously contracted the number of voices in our nation's media.

Solution

According to the Supreme Court, the First Amendment protects the public's right to "an uninhibited marketplace of ideas in which truth will prevail," and "suitable access to social, political, esthetic, moral and other ideas and experiences." The rights of viewers and listeners are more important than the economic interests of media conglomerates.

Action

We ask you to join the broad coalition of consumer, public interest, media reform, organized labor and other groups representing millions of Americans in proposing the Bill of Media Rights.

Example Three: Malkia Cyril, Director, the Center for Media Justice (formerly the Youth Media Council)

Issues: Media consolidation, bias, responsiveness to the community

Target audience: Media democracy activists

Frames: Corporate power/consumer rights; local news matters; diversity matters

Problem

In the Bay Area, like other areas around the country, Clear Channel owns more radio stations than it's supposed to. It owns both the right wing radio station and the hip-hop station. It's reorganized Community Affairs so that one director is responsible for both of those stations. This shift has meant fewer progressive voices on the air, fewer young people on the air, fewer local artists able to get on the air.

Solution

We've been working with community members, organizers and artists to do three things. One is to increase the air time that local artists get on the hip-hop radio station. Two is to hold the right wing radio station accountable for balance and for bias. And three is to push Clear Channel to reorganize Community Affairs to be more representative and responsive to the community.

Action

We are going to go back into our communities with a renewed vigor for change and for media accountability locally. To find out more about what we are doing, go to our Web site at www.youthmediacouncil.org.

IT'S TIME TO CHANGE THE STORY!

By Patrick Reinsborough

AT THE HEART OF THE STRUGGLE for media justice and media reform is the recognition that we live in a world shaped by stories. These stories take many different forms: from the daily anecdotes we share with friends and loved ones to pre-packaged corporate “news” stories, from a favorite novel or movie to the deepest personal narratives we carry around to remind us who we are and where we come from.

Unfortunately we live in a world where the stories that are beamed at us through the mass media rarely reflect our lives. The media has increasingly become an occupied territory—a corporate-controlled “culture industry” that sells us trivia and titillation while promoting racist, sexist and homophobic stereotypes and uncritically parroting the perspectives (and lies) of power holders.

A *narrative analysis of power* recognizes that all power relations have a narrative component. Stories are embedded with power—the power to explain and justify the status quo, as well as the power to make change imaginable. Which stories define the cultural norms? Who is portrayed as the main character, and whose story is erased or distorted? Who gets to tell their own story and who has stories told about them? These questions are the narrative components of the relationships of power and privilege, the unequal access to resources, and denials of self-determination that define much of our current economic and political system.

Story-Based Strategy

Movements and campaigns that are pushing for sweeping changes in current policies must, first and foremost, win in the realm of ideas. One of the most effective ways to change attitudes and provide new information is by telling a good story.

Ironically, so many of us that can tell a great story over the dinner table forget the basics when it comes to telling our broader campaign story. We make the mistake of focusing only on what the public doesn't know (“If they only knew the facts...”). There is much important

work to be done to educate the public about the deeply flawed policies governing media ownership. What people *don't* know is a big problem. However, applying a narrative analysis of power means we need to flip this approach and also examine what people *do* know. What are the existing stories and assumptions of the people we are trying to reach?

An effective way to combine an understanding of narrative power with traditional movement-building skills is to create a *story-based strategy*. By placing a story at the center of a campaign, organizers can articulate the change they want to make with a common narrative that ties together messaging, media, advocacy and organizing strategy.

Storytelling for Social Change

Whether we're analyzing our opponent's story or calculating how to most effectively tell our own story, there are some simple elements to keep in mind.

The Conflict: A good story has to define the conflict and frame what is at stake. What is the problem we are addressing? How is it currently framed? What is emphasized and what is avoided? How can we change the framing?

The Characters: Who are the characters in our story? This can be a profound organizing question: Who are “we?” Are we amplifying the voices of the most impacted people? Who are the other characters in the story? Choose your messengers carefully, since the messenger is often as important as the message.

Show, Don't Tell: What is the imagery of this story—what pictures linger in our minds? What about songs? Poems? Metaphors? “Show, don't tell” also means avoid a preachy or self-righteous tone.

Foreshadowing: There's an old advertising industry saying, “People can only go somewhere that they have already been to in their minds.” This rings true for social change work too. Our stories must forecast the future we desire. What is our vision of resolution to the conflict? What is our solution to the problem?

Sharing our stories makes us strong, and creating a common story about the possibility of change makes us even stronger.

Assumptions: What are the assumptions underlying the status quo story? On the other side, what assumptions and core values does our base share that will strengthen our sense of community as we work towards our common vision? Assumptions are the glue that holds a story together, but they are also the vulnerable parts of a flawed or deceptive narrative. When we spotlight these assumptions, we can challenge and transform them.

Memes: When Stories Spread

Identifying these elements of your narrative can help a campaign craft a common story. The next question is how does the story spread and inspire more imagination? A useful tool for organizers is the idea of a *meme*. A *meme* (rhymes with dream) is like a gene of culture that self-replicates like a virus of the mind.

Examples of memes are ideas or slogans (“Low Power to the People” or “Stop Big Media”), rituals (shaking hands) and symbols (the Nike swoosh or the peace sign) that spread virally from person to person, generation to generation. When we reproduce the meme—by using the phrase, discussing the idea or replicating the ritual or symbol—we spread the story. Social movements have always created memes as containers for larger stories that can change the dominant culture: No Taxation Without Representation; the raised fist; Think Globally, Act Locally; Si Se Puede!

Memes are not magic wands, but when combined with broader organizing and advocacy strategies, they can make social change efforts much more effective. An effective meme

becomes a touchstone, offering a catchy symbol, image or ritual that spreads the campaign narrative. In order to win campaigns, we also need to pay attention to what memes our opponents are using and challenge them in ways that reframe the debate.

Winning the Battle of the Story

We know how many voices are left out of our current good ol’ boys network of just-us corporate media. Whether it’s the voices of poor people, communities of color and other marginalized communities or any type of dissenting perspectives, the consequences of this silencing are very real.

In communities across the country, inspiring campaigns of resistance and transformation are standing up to powerful corporations and bought-and-paid-for-politicians. The Battle of the Story is being waged daily to determine whether our collective mediascape will be a sterile corporate monoculture or a vibrant ecosystem of diverse voices and perspectives.

In the words of Indian novelist and activist Arundhati Roy, “Our strategy should be not only to confront empire, but to lay siege to it. To deprive it of oxygen. To shame it. To mock it. With our art, our music, our literature, our stubbornness, our joy, our brilliance, our sheer relentlessness—and our ability to tell our own stories.” As the media justice/media reform movement continues to grow and deepen its alliance with other connected movements, we are reclaiming this most fundamental power to tell our own stories. Let’s make sure we tell them well.

Patrick Reinsborough is the co-founder of smartMeme, a strategy and training organization that combines grassroots movement building with strategies to change the stories that shape the dominant culture. Patrick works as a trainer, strategist and movement consultant supporting grassroots social change organizations working for peace, justice, democracy and ecological sanity. He lives in San Francisco and runs smartMeme’s West Coast office.

CASE STUDY

TAKING BACK THE AIRWAVES STORY BY STORY

By Hannah Sassaman

ONE WOULD THINK that the battle to build low-power, 100-watt community radio stations on the FM dials of America's communities would be the red-headed stepchild of the media movement. Analog transmitters and antennas on church steeples? One young person's voice on the dial—the equivalent of a light bulb surrounded by the megawatt stadium floodlights of Clear Channel and Viacom? You're kidding, right?

In terms of legislative priorities, one would think that passing a bill to expand community radio in New Orleans and New York and Nashville is about on par with a Congressional resolution to name a day after a long-dead baseball player—a fine enough thing to do, but if our lawmakers don't get to it, it's because they had more important things on their plate.

But the truth is that community radio has emerged as one of the biggest battles of the media movement. This is in no small part due to the efforts of community radio activists from around the country who took their stories to Capitol Hill and the FCC—putting them out as the most potent currency available to win over Commissioners and Congressmembers in the fight to expand our voices on our own airwaves.

Here at the Prometheus Radio Project, where we live and breathe the answer to the question, “how do I start a radio station,” we learned early on that facts and figures would play a supporting role in our struggle to put radio stations into the hands of regular people. When America's biggest broadcasters convinced Congress that community radio stations would cause technical interference to big stations in big cities, the FCC rebutted them with an independent, Congressionally mandated \$2.2 million study. The study's results:

There is plenty of room for low-power FM community radio in most cities, and all smaller communities nationwide. That study is our biggest fact-based weapon—especially since it was designed by America's biggest broadcasters and is fully supported by all five members of the FCC.

But it isn't enough. It isn't nearly enough. All the National Association of Broadcasters needs to do is tell Congressmembers that they have a twinge of doubt that there's room for both community radio and their top-40, news-free, localism-poor stations, and Congressmembers will fight to keep community radio out of their districts.

That is—unless they hear their constituents tell stories of how a local radio station can save lives, expand religious and community voices or address the social and economic struggles of their region.

Some stories are powerful enough to transcend congressional districts, and to cross the aisle. In 2005, as Hurricane Katrina was barreling towards the community of Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, Brice Phillips and the volunteers of WQRZ-LP faced a challenge. This low-power FM radio station was about to be hit by over 100-mile-an-hour winds and the loss of the entire county's power grid. Bay St. Louis, and other Gulf towns in range of the station, were going to learn what the center of a Category Five hurricane felt like.

Brice and his partner, Christine, worked around the clock to provide generator support for their station and to connect with the Emergency Operations Center. Most impressively, they climbed their 130-foot tower to move the station's antenna to more stable ground. Theirs was the only sta-

tion in the entire county that stayed on the air during and after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Since the hurricane, Brice has been an incredible partner in the fight to expand low-power FM radio. Through national exposure on MSNBC and PBS, his story has been seen in millions of American households. And his voice helped inspire bipartisan Congressmembers to introduce the Local Community Radio Act, which would bring community radio to thousands more American cities and towns.

Not every community radio story is as dramatic as WQRZ's, but every story can be powerfully told as a battle for a community's soul. And hundreds of low-power FM radio stations have told their stories in front of our nation's lawmakers to great effect. Take WLEZ-LP in Jackson, Mississippi. After this station connected the state's Arts Commission, the Chamber of Commerce and dozens of coastal groups to their Senate offices, Senator Trent Lott voted to expand low-power FM, and Senator Thad Cochran co-sponsored the bill that would bring it to other coastal communities.

In this Congress, or the next, we are poised to break the blockade keeping thousands of these stations off the FM dial. For more information, see www.prometheusradio.org or www.freepress.net/lpfin. And remember—your story might be the key to bringing a low-power station to your community soon!

Hannah Sassaman was an organizer at the Prometheus Radio Project for six years. She now does political communications with the Service Employees International Union. She looks forward to working long term to build radio stations with amazing community groups as an ally for many years to come.