

THEORY FRAMING

Like the frame around a photograph, a *conceptual* frame highlights certain events and facts, while making others invisible. Effectively framing your message can make the difference between winning and losing.

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“WHEN FRAMING AN ACTION OR CAMPAIGN, WE MUST CONSIDER HOW THE PROBLEM OR CONFLICT CAN BE MOST COMPELLINGLY PORTRAYED.”

“Our revolution is fought with concepts, not with guns.”

—Gloria Anzaldúa

We are narrative animals, always using story to make sense of our world, and conceptual frames are key to this process. Frames, writes George Lakoff, “are the mental structures that allow human beings to understand reality — and sometimes to create what we take to be reality.”

Whether we’re aware of them or not, frames are embedded in the ways we describe and understand the world, imposing a meaning that often benefits those with power. For example, when economists give the “economic forecast,” the analogy of economy-as-weather subtly steers us to think of capitalism as a force of nature, beyond human control. This framing benefits banks and corporations, as it obscures how they actually manipulate markets to their own advantage.

Framing can be a useful tool not just for reinforcing power, but also for contesting it (see: PRINCIPLE: Reframe the issue). When framing an action or campaign, we must consider how the problem or conflict can be most compellingly portrayed so as to disrupt the dominant framing and replace it with a frame that benefits the movement’s goals.

Some questions to ask include: Who are the good guys? Who are

RELATED TOOLS

Stories

- Battle in Seattle
- Billionaires for Bush
- Bring Back Our Girls
- Dhawili (turn on the lights)
- Flower Speech Campaign
- Ghana ThinkTank
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- Stop Praver Plan
- The Salt March
- #ThisFlag
- Trail of Dreams
- Welcome to Palestine
- Whose Tea Party?

Tactics

- Banner hang
- Citizen’s arrest
- Cultural disobedience
- Culture jamming
- Guerrilla projection
- Hashtag campaign

the bad guys? What is the conflict and what is at stake? What hidden forces or new solutions must be revealed? What are our underlying values? Is there a unifying theme that can create a framing structure for our story?

For example, when workers are organizing for better benefits, rather than rally for “paid” sick time, which implies people should be paid by their already oh-so-generous employers to be home sick, they may choose to rally for “earned sick time,” which implies that the workers have earned this benefit as compensation. The shift from “paid” to “earned” creates an entirely different frame for understanding, and discussing, the issue.

While proponents of the so-called “Stop and Frisk” program in New York City call the practice of “police stops” a boon for “community safety” that “saves lives,” opponents of the program focus their message using the frame of “racial profiling,” and say that the policy “criminalizes a whole race and community of people.” They widen and at the same time focus the frame on revealing a narrative of racial injustice, effectively mobilizing a broad-based movement of people of color and allies against racism.

Another example: Fossil fuel company-backed scientists call themselves “climate skeptics” for a reason. What scientist worth his/her salt isn’t skeptical? Isn’t that part of the scientific method? Rather than go down the dead-end road of “But they’re lying!,” climate activists have been able to frame these voices as marginal using analogies like “tobacco science” and labeling them “climate deniers.” A denier (as opposed to a liar) makes an active choice to refute a difficult truth that society has already accepted (see: PRINCIPLE: Turn the tables).

When you engage in framing, you must be willing to accept that the facts of your case alone are not enough for you to win (see: THEORY: Ethical spectacle). Framing is a struggle over meaning. As framing guru George Lakoff reminds us, “Truth must be framed effectively to be seen at all. That is why an understanding of framing matters.”

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LEARN MORE

Re: Imagining Change: An Introduction to Story-based Strategy by Doyle Canning and Patrick Reinsborough
Center for Story-based Strategy, 2009
<https://www.storybasedstrategy.org/download-reimagining-change/>

Resource Library
The Center for Media Justice
<http://centerformediajustice.org/build-leadership/resource-library/>

- Hashtag hijack
- Image theatre
- Light Brigade
- Reverse graffiti
- Storytelling

Principles

- Brand or be branded
- Change a name to change the game
- Change is the only constant
- Focus on basic needs
- Kill them with kindness
- Lead with sympathetic characters
- Make the invisible visible
- Recapture the flag
- Reframe the issue
- Seek common ground
- Stay on message
- Think narratively
- Turn the tables
- Use your radical fringe to shift the Overton window

Theories

- Action logic
- Alienation effect
- Capitalism
- Commodity fetishism
- Cultural hegemony
- Ethical spectacle
- Memes
- Prefigurative politics
- Theatre of the Oppressed

Methodologies

- Battle of the story
- Peel the onion
- Perception box
- Pillars of power
- SMART objectives
- Spectrum of allies
- Story of self, us, and now

TAGS

Communications, Campaign strategy, Media, Social media, Movement building

Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate

George Lakoff, 2004

https://books.google.com/books/about/The_All_New_Don_t_Think_of_an_Elephant.html?

[id=aWhpBAAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=kp_read_button#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books/about/The_All_New_Don_t_Think_of_an_Elephant.html?id=aWhpBAAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=kp_read_button#v=onepage&q&f=false)

Fair Game: A Strategy for Racial Justice Communications in the Obama Era

Praxis Project, 2011

<https://books.google.jo/books?>

[id=V7aYSQAACAAJ&dq=Fair+Game:+A+Strategy+for+Racial+Justice+Communications+in+the+Obama+Era&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi86abX36rZAhUKZVAKHVzoBqgQ6AEIJTAA](https://books.google.jo/books?id=V7aYSQAACAAJ&dq=Fair+Game:+A+Strategy+for+Racial+Justice+Communications+in+the+Obama+Era&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi86abX36rZAhUKZVAKHVzoBqgQ6AEIJTAA)