Talking about Gun Violence:
Changing the Conversation to Move Policy Forward

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Communications Tasks

• What are you up against?
• What are the default ways that people think about a progressive policy agenda?
• What are the values that undergird these default positions?
• What alternative – but less salient – ways of thinking advance public support for the safety net?
“Finding some familiar element causes us to activate a story that is labeled by that familiar element, and we understand the new story as if it were an exemplar of that old element.”

“Understanding means finding a story you already know and saying, ‘Oh yeah, that one.’”

“Once we have found (the) story, we stop processing.”

Roger Schank
What is a Frame?

“The way a story is told — its selective use of particular values, symbols, metaphors, and messengers — which, in turn, triggers the shared and durable cultural models that people use to make sense of their world.”

(FrameWorks Institute)
The Power of Frames

• Tell us what this communication is ABOUT
• Signal what counts, what can be ignored
• “Fill in” or infer missing information
• Influence decision outcomes
“People approach the world not as naïve, blank-slate receptacles who take in stimuli ... in some independent and objective way, but rather as experienced and sophisticated veterans of perception who have stored their prior experiences as an organized mass. This prior experience then takes the form of expectations about the world, and in the vast majority of cases, the world, being a systematic place, confirms these expectations, saving the individual the trouble of figuring things out anew all the time.”

What Research from The Social and Cognitive Sciences Suggests About How People Process Information

- People are not blank slates
- People use mental shortcuts to make sense of the world
- Understanding is frame-based, not fact-based
- Incoming information provides cues that connect to the existing pictures in our heads
- People get most information about public affairs from the news media, which creates a framework of expectation, or dominant frame
- Over time, we develop habits of thought and expectation that configure incoming information to conform to this frame
- To change opinion, you must shift the frame
## Attribution of Responsibility

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EPISODIC FRAMES</th>
<th>THEMATIC FRAMES</th>
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<td>• Individuals</td>
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<td>• Appeal to consumers</td>
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<td>• Better information</td>
<td>• Better Policies</td>
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<td>• Fix the person</td>
<td>• Fix the Condition</td>
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Levels of Thinking

Level 1: Values
(Freedom, Fairness, Justice, Responsibility)

Level 2: Policy Domains
(Health, Education, Welfare)

Level 3: Specific Policies
(Child Nutrition Act, ACA, etc.)

What’s at stake?
What’s this about?
How would policy help?
Reversing Framing Effects
What is Reframing?

“When a movement wishes to put forward a radically new set of ideas, it must engage in frame transformation: new values may have to be planted and nurtured, old meanings or understandings jettisoned, and erroneous beliefs or ‘misframings’ reframed.”

Tarrow, Snow and Benford
Reframing the Public Discourse

- Pivoting
- Inoculation
- Order Matters
- Tone: Rhetorical v. Reasonable
- Orthogonal Messengers
- Empirical and Discoverable
The “Swamp” of Public Thinking
Gun Violence? What’s in the swamp of...

- Protect the Constitution
- Freedom
- First Amendment
- Rights
- Second Amendment
- Personal/Public Safety
- Public Health
- National Security
- Violence in Media
- Mental Illness
- “Mean World” Syndrome
- Culture of Violence
- Freedom
Guns: Episodic vs. Thematic Framing

- Choice/freedom
- Individuals
- Responsibility of parents
- Bad behavior
- Vital industry
- Protection

- Public safety
- Broader society
- Responsibility of government
- Lax regulation
- Responsible Mgmt.
- Harmful product
### A Sample Message Template for Reframing Gun Violence

**LEVEL ONE**

**Values**

**LEVEL TWO**

**Issue Category**

**LEVEL THREE**

**Specific Policy Solutions**

- **Prevention**
- **Gun Violence**
- **Assault Weapons Ban**