

How to Think Differently about Communication:

Your Nonprofit's Role in Reframing the Post-Election Discourse

by Nat Kendall-Taylor and Susan Nall Bales

Our habitual go-to approaches to framing social issues work against finding solutions to the problems.

The good news is, write the authors, “we don’t have just one mental model for how an issue works.”

This multiple models approach holds the key to interrupting unbalanced, unproductive, and

altogether false frames and replacing them with better explanations about how the world actually works.

TIS THE SEASON OF REFLECTION. IN THE WAKE of the 2016 elections, conventional wisdom has been turned on its head. Defeatism and guilt are spreading, and it’s hard to look forward from within the fog of the warlike discourse we’ve slogged through. This is the time when we resolve nevertheless to fight harder, give more, and be more resolute in staying the course. These are our individual reactions. But what do we do in our public roles?

What should we do as members of the nonprofit sector to assess the impact of this election on the sector’s future well-being? What should

we pay attention to as we try to figure out what the election means for the landscape of ideas in which we operate, the work that we do, and the goals that we strive to achieve? How are we to think of our roles in bringing communities together to improve outcomes for all people, protect habitats, and make the world a more peaceful place? How can we continue to lead organizations with long histories that transcend presidents and parties to successfully provide services? The current context is fraught with both peril and puzzle.

Electoral politics, as explained by the mainstream press in 2016, is an exercise in binary thinking. Rather than considering the important issues facing our nation and how a range of approaches might address them, the electoral discourse has

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narrowed into polarities. As suggested by linguist Deborah Tannen, America's "argument culture" tends to conceptualize everything as a "metaphorical battle."¹ There are very real consequences of this framing. Tannen explains: "[I]t makes it more difficult to solve the problems facing our society, and it is corrosive to the human spirit. By creating an atmosphere of animosity, it makes individuals more likely to turn on each other, so that everyone feels more vulnerable and more isolated. And that is why the argument culture is destructive to the common good."²

Steeped in this culture, we are at risk of using the same dead-end framework to explain the electoral aftermath. The media's "horse-race" frame (who's ahead, who's behind) during the 2016 election impeded consideration of the policies that the presidential candidates espoused; and its "balance" frame, as represented by information from "both sides" of the debate, oversimplified the complex issues we face. Now the "two Americas" frame threatens to further polarize Americans and to distract thought leaders from the critical work that we must do to bring our country together.

In the "two Americas" frame, people are either blue or red, liberal or conservative. The prescription for change is persuasion, not explanation. This binary approach obscures the important work of elections in engaging the American public in thinking about the critical issues of our time and evaluating how we wish to address them. When elections are waged at this level, we all lose—but the nonprofit sector loses big. Binary thinking and the campaigns that activate and ingrain it work against our central mission: to engage Americans in understanding, discussing, and addressing the problems facing society with respect and reason. This mission is not about persuasion and manipulation—it is about explanation, inclusion, and engagement.

The "two Americas" frame is not serving us well. Moreover, it simply isn't reflective of the truth. American culture offers its citizens a limited set of ideas to understand sociopolitical issues, and we suffer as a result. Just at the time when we are most primed to reconsider and reengage with our working models of how our country works, we have been fed a paltry, binary diet. It

doesn't have to be this way. We have more ways of looking at the world's and our country's future than were exercised in this election. But getting beyond binary thinking requires us to dig deep into our mental repertoires and become aware of how our options have been narrowed and what has been lost in the process.

Cultural Models

Anthropologists call the intuitive explanations and taken-for-granted assumptions that we bring to bear on our political (and other) judgments "cultural models." The term refers to the way we hold culture in our minds and use it to bring meaning to our experiences, which includes the information we are presented with in our everyday lives. Cultural models are an important part of the way we make sense of our world and how we act in it. Scholars have shown that these mental constructs are culturally specific; that is, as Americans we are steeped in stories and common experiences that predispose us to certain ways of looking at the world. If you ask people why some get ahead in life and others don't, different cultures will share different models of how success "works": who is responsible, what happens first, and with what consequences. These cultural models focus our attention on what is relevant and important about an issue, and in so doing, they shape how we think about social issues—including those that are more obscure and harder to consider and understand. Although they may be endorsed by different people to different degrees, research has found that cultural models are largely consistent across populations—like a common set of tools that our cultures have given us over time to help us make sense of our world and how it works.

The critical point is that we don't have just one mental model for how an issue works; we have multiple ways of looking at and understanding social issues. We might attribute success, for example, to individual effort, luck, or privilege; or, we might consider it the end result of the way a community makes resources available to people who live there, the goals we set for our community, or the roles available to those within it. We might think of our economy as a limited and finite resource—a pie from which each additional piece

taken means less for the rest; or, we might see it as a pool of resources that can be added to and expanded over time. As psychological anthropologist Bradd Shore has explained:

In the realm of politics and policy debates, what the idea of multiple models suggests is that different advocates are not just trying to impose different understandings on people but rather that they are trying to appeal to one or more of the models . . . to change the salience of those models. That is, they recognize that for most people, it's possible for them to move between more than one understanding of something, such as what's more important—individualism, and focusing on the moral individual, or the notion of a communitarian value of what's good for the group. Both of those are perfectly well modeled in American culture. . . . The difference is not whether one model exists or doesn't exist but which model is salient, or foregrounded, and which is backgrounded. . . . The competition for the hearts and minds of people, in policy work, is the competition for restructuring salience and what's in the foreground. . . . The model that's in the foreground is going to be the default reading people have. And the other will remain, not hidden but latent, in the background, fuzzy.³

In other words, when we say that the world has changed, or that we are in a whole new “ball game,” we are really saying that the conceptual environment in which we operate has shifted—that there has been movement in the relative availability and relevance of certain models of how the world works. What this past election did to the cultural landscape in which nonprofits operate is to pull certain ideas about how the world works forward and push others deeper into our subconscious, where we find them harder and harder to “think” and therefore harder and harder to access and articulate. (We say that this foregrounding and backgrounding process makes some ideas “easy/easier to think” and others “hard/harder to think.”) The 2016 election discourse pulled three important cultural models to the foreground of

American thinking: *self-makingness*; *separate fates*; and *business knows best*.

What Got “Easier to Think” in 2016

Self-Makingness. According to this model, people make their own fates through their strength of character and the wisdom of their choices. Successful individuals are, by definition, superior people who have maximized their inherent talents. Tautologically, they are winners, not losers. As journalist James Hohmann has shown, Donald Trump and some of his cabinet nominees have acknowledged their intellectual debt to Ayn Rand's objectivism, in which there are “makers and takers, and . . . the takers are parasitic moochers who get in the way of the morally-superior innovators.”⁴ As Trump has explained, “If you look at black and African American youth . . . they've never done more poorly. There's no spirit.”⁵ In Trump's Rand-inspired view, it would follow that Black Americans are responsible for their community's higher rates of poverty and incarceration, and lower levels of education, homeownership, and other markers of “success” in this country.

While the self-makingness model is most vividly on display in Trump's talk, it is not without representation in liberal rhetoric. As journalist Carlos Lozada has suggested, Barack Obama is a major purveyor of the notion that one's biography of success is a morality tale that has the power to incite others to overcome obstacles and achieve greatness.⁶ Hillary Clinton also adheres to the self-makingness trope. Her unique and innate abilities and experiences seemingly credentialed her as the person destined to crack the ultimate glass ceiling as the first female president of the United States. Lost in her narrative were the many scholarships, mentors, and other opportunities that made her biography both possible and potentially replicable. For example, her middle-class upbringing no doubt featured multiple intercessors who helped propel her achievement. But many girls and women do not have access to mentors and sponsors. Research shows that only half of American adolescents can identify three or more nonfamilial adults they could turn to for help with an important question about their life.⁷

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Pulling forward ways to engage people in thinking about the contexts in which communities support or impede individual achievement and well-being requires that nonprofit communicators anticipate the dominance of self-makingness and prepare themselves with powerful strategies to cue alternative ways of thinking.

While these bootstrap models are not “bad” stories per se, they are unbalanced, reflecting a myopic emphasis on an individual’s ability to overcome adversity and realize his or her talents. Pushed to the background in these models, as Shore would say, are issues of race, class, and privilege, as well as the environments, experiences, resources, and programs that play important roles in shaping individuals’ outcomes. This election’s sharp focus on candidates’ unique biographical characteristics failed to help Americans understand that success or failure is not, in fact, due solely to personal characteristics.

As a result, assessments of worthiness and effort are now forefront in people’s thinking: they are increasingly top-of-mind, “easy to think,” and cognitively comfortable. Meanwhile, notions of context and advantage have been backgrounded, becoming less familiar and harder to engage. This means that nonprofits will have to work even harder to connect the dots for the public. Housing advocates, for example, will need to remind people that, in the words of Winston Churchill, “We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us.” People need help seeing that when housing is designed with such goals in mind as ensuring that people can walk safely, access healthy foods, and avoid exposure to harmful contaminants, this creates an environment that facilitates positive health and growth and dramatically increases the probability of healthy outcomes. Housing that makes physical activity onerous, makes it difficult to access healthy foods, and exposes people to mold and other contaminants decreases inhabitants’ likelihood of healthy outcomes. These seemingly obvious points have become “harder to think,” thanks to the ascendancy of self-makingness.

STEM learning offers another example. Here, self-makingness is evident in the widespread public assumption that science, technology, engineering, and mathematics are innate talents that, simply, some kids have and others lack. Viewed from this “either you’ve got it or you don’t” vantage point, the availability and quality of STEM programming is of minimal importance.⁸ But the existence of multiple ways of thinking and the ability of frames to orchestrate and activate these ways of looking at the world provide a dose of

optimism. FrameWorks research shows that the determinism can be overcome when interrupted and replaced with a different frame: specifically, explaining that some kids have access to a host of rich STEM experiences that serve as “charging stations” for their knowledge and engagement, while others have few means of charging up their interest. By activating, and pulling forward, thinking about the ways in which communities have different levels of resources, STEM advocates can put self-makingness in its proper place, rounding it out with a more contextually sensitive perspective. Pulling forward ways to engage people in thinking about the contexts in which communities support or impede individual achievement and well-being requires that nonprofit communicators anticipate the dominance of self-makingness and prepare themselves with powerful strategies to cue alternative ways of thinking.

Separate Fates. When applying the separate fates cultural model, people reason that things that happen to individuals only affect those individuals and those immediately around them—larger communities, and our society as a whole, are unaffected. This model encourages us to see other people’s “troubles” as regrettable, eliciting perhaps a charitable donation, but it masks our interdependence.⁹ In other words, what happens to “those” people “over there” does not affect the health and well-being of “my” people “over here.” Xenophobia, racism, and sexism were hugely visible in election discourse and media coverage this past year, but underlying these issues was the less visible assumption that we have separate fates. This model, however, is equally pernicious and perhaps more insidious, as it empowers those same “otherizing” perspectives but in a less obvious way. That is, the separate fates model feeds and encourages racism through the seemingly more polite and descriptive belief that we live in separate worlds, deal with separate problems, and must come up with separate solutions. It flies in the face of the civil rights movement’s core positioning argument, by way of Martin Luther King Jr.: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

This separate fates frame is one reason behind the struggle many Americans have with the

statement “Black lives matter.” This is because they don’t see Black lives as mattering to *their* lives or to society as *they* experience it. As FrameWorks noted in a recent report on juvenile justice, for many Americans, “African Americans are understood to live in worlds that are both geographically and culturally apart from mainstream America. This cultural model is strengthened when crossed with issues of juvenile crime, as juveniles are also understood to be a ‘tribe apart.’ When reasoning through this model, the issues young people of color face in the criminal justice system may be regrettable, but have little bearing on the society as a whole.”¹⁰ This model was clear in Trump’s phrasing of “the Blacks” and “the Hispanics,”¹¹ and in his “otherizing” descriptions of life in Black America: “You’re living in your poverty, your schools are no good, you have no jobs, 58 percent of your youth is unemployed—what the hell do you have to lose?”¹²

But, again, the dividing wall between “us” and “them” was on display across the aisle, as well. Clinton activated the separate fates model when

she asserted that, “You could put half of Trump’s supporters into what I call the basket of deplorables. Right? The racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic—you name it. . . . Now some of those folks, they are irredeemable, but thankfully they are not America.”¹³ When uttering these words, Clinton was clearly attempting to make a strong symbolic statement about what America stands for—and what it doesn’t. Yet her willing marginalization of one segment of the population undermined her “stronger together” assertions and cued unproductive “us-versus-them” thinking.

For nonprofits that advocate for the overall well-being of populations and the centrality of currently marginalized groups—whether African Americans or rural Americans—to America’s future, the separate fates cultural model serves to unravel social responsibility beyond one’s family or group. Moreover, it negates what public health experts assert to be core tenets of population health. At the most obvious level, how do you campaign for childhood immunizations when

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As FrameWorks has observed in past research, talking about places, how they interconnect, and inequitable distribution of services across different places helps people think about solutions.

anyone can opt out and become a “free rider”?

Many nonprofits will be challenged as this model becomes more dominant in the public mind. Watch for it in discussions of income inequality, where even people of good will can struggle to understand how inequality negatively affects society as a whole, or, conversely, why measures to address inequality benefit us all. Yet, scholars show that the effects of economic segregation reverberate across society and diminish the quality of life for everyone. A new FrameWorks report offers strategies to overcome the separate fates model and trigger more productive ones.¹⁴ This will be especially useful in the year ahead as a way to remind people of what they already know—but might be forgetting—as a result of the election. As one of our new reports about socioeconomically mixed neighborhoods states, “. . . we strongly recommend that communicators consistently use the value of *Interdependence*. If the field coalesces around this value and finds resonant and authentic ways of using it in communications and outreach to groups across the political spectrum, this will, over time, help shift public thinking about socioeconomic mixing away from default individualistic modes and toward a more collective and systemic perspective.”¹⁵

As FrameWorks has observed in past research, talking about places, how they interconnect, and inequitable distribution of services across different places helps people think about solutions. That’s why advocates make the so-called “zip code argument” to call for better school financing, and why they use the “patchwork” metaphor to explain deficiencies in rural infrastructure. FrameWorks has found both these strategies to be effective. The separate fates model is assailable—but only if nonprofit communicators do not inadvertently reinforce it, keep their conceptual task in mind, and use frames that get to “we” rather than to “us” and “them.”

Business Knows Best. Looking at the world through the business knows best frame, corporations and the government are assumed to work in similar ways, but with one essential difference: corporations are understood to be inherently more efficient and effective than government, which is thought of as wasteful, inefficient,

and inept. Trump used this assumption to great advantage during the election, and much of the public bought it. Having made money for himself and his company, many reasoned, he could do it for the country, too—and he could do it better than those without his business experience. Using this model, people are unable to see different purposes for business and government. Indeed, Trump’s advantage as an experienced CEO made up for his lack of experience in government and measured formidably against Clinton’s decades-long track record in public service. Moreover, Trump’s corporate experience was understood as uniquely positioning him to solve problems and to avoid the massive inefficiencies and corruption that tend to be associated with government officials. As one Trump voter replied when asked to comment on an anticipated healthcare gap after the repeal of the Affordable Care Act, “a smart businessman like Trump would [not] let that happen.”¹⁶ Finally, business executives’ lack of government experience only reinforces the purity of their motives. As Mitt Romney explained when he endorsed Trump nominee Betsy DeVos for secretary of education, “As a highly successful businesswoman, DeVos doesn’t need the job now, nor will she be looking for an education job later.”¹⁷ In this formula, the successful businessperson is the ultimate public servant, because his or her wealth inoculates against self-interest and corruption.

This way of thinking is not new. A decade ago, FrameWorks conducted a series of studies into how Americans think about government, and found that “distinctions between public and private hold little meaning” for Americans. It is worth quoting from the study summary at length:

There is widespread confusion over the difference between the public and private sectors, and numerous manifestations of this confusion. First, the private sector is presumed to be more accountable and efficient. Since there is little understanding of differences in goals and motivation between the sectors, the public sector has been degraded to a role that is, by definition, less effective than the private sector.


When operating in this mindset, government would be better if it were “run like a business” because government would adopt business’ standards of accountability and be more efficient and careful with tax dollars. At the same time, people are suspicious of the private sector’s inherent lack of transparency and its “bottom-line” motivation, and see government as more open and accountable for actions. What is missing is a sense that government has a mission that is entirely different from private business: it is, by definition, supposed to be acting in the public interest.¹⁸

Similarly, in a series of studies on how Americans view education, FrameWorks found that “[b]roader societal goals for public education—such as public health or citizen participation—are rarely mentioned by the American public.”¹⁹ As Shore would say, the backgrounding and fuzziness over the value of the public sector and public service work have been a long time in the making.

The obvious consequence of this ascendant cultural model will come in a knee-jerk solution we are likely to see put forth in response to our social problems: “Privatize it.” While many Americans may initially recoil at this recommendation, they are at the same time steeped in a cultural discourse that assumes that private is inherently better—more efficient, less expensive, and offering more freedom of choice—than public. As a result, the public may not resist arguments to privatization as the solution to social problems as vociferously as they might if pro-government cultural models were stronger.

This model has even more detrimental consequences. When people reason from a business knows best model, they see no reason to question why government shouldn’t be run like a business. The question of whether this equivalency is appropriate doesn’t come to mind. Without more explanation, Americans have little in their mental repertoire to remind them that taxes, public goods, and services are not immediate exchanges but are distributed over time. Some goods and services are

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Nonprofit
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immediately available (such as education in public schools), but others aren't available until later (such as healthcare insurance coverage provided by Medicare, or long-term public transportation programs). Cutting taxes *now* leaves future beneficiaries behind, both in the sense that costs will be higher down the road and that meeting those higher costs may be altogether unaffordable. This model also prevents people from thinking about budgets and taxes as instruments to plan for the common good that reflect our shared priorities and responsibilities rather than our individual choices and preferences. Only when we make the differential goals of business and government *explicit* and when we *explain* the incremental steps toward long-term public welfare will people recall how taxes—as opposed to private savings accounts—support the public good.²⁰

For nonprofit communicators, many of whom work with government agencies (and who are often indistinguishable from government in the public mind), the business knows best way of thinking means their very identity may cue resistance to their work.²¹ Donors and community leaders may harbor unexpressed assumptions about nonprofit groups' inherent inefficiency, anachronistic missions, or outright corruption. Nonprofit communicators should not assume that people understand that healthcare coverage and services, public education, and subsidized housing serve the public good. They must clearly communicate the importance of public services and explain that, unlike nonprofits, businesses are not beholden to the public good but to their bottom line. Doing otherwise could be a costly communications oversight.

At the same time that the ideas above have been pulled forward in people's thinking, there is another set of models that were pushed to the background in 2016 and became "harder to think." These fall into three main categories: *our sociological imaginations*; *our ecological imaginations*; and *our civic imaginations*.

What Got "Harder to Think" in 2016

Our Sociological Imaginations. When thinking in self-makingness mode, attention is drawn to internal dynamics of character and effort, making

it easy to ignore the conditions that constrain or promote success and well-being. As we exercise our self-makingness muscles, our sociological muscles begin to atrophy. It becomes more difficult to see how systems, structures, and places shape outcomes, or how inequities have been built into systems over time. How can we tell stories that enable people to practice using their sociological muscles so that they can rebalance the way they understand the roles of individuals and systems in our social worlds?

Our Ecological Imaginations. As long as the separate fates model is dominant, the ways that our surroundings shape us will remain beyond view. Our linked fate, dependent on other species, places, and populations, will be obscured. Without an ecological way to see the world, the problems that afflict others are regrettable but are not immediately salient, because they are not ours. How do we communicate in ways that make interconnections clear and discourage NIMBY (not in my backyard) thinking?

Our Civic Imaginations. As business knows best thinking gains cognitive and cultural real estate, we will increasingly focus on competition—as opposed to collaboration—when charting our path to the future, and civic space will take a backseat to private property. Key civic principles will get pushed out of mind: how society is strengthened when benefits are shared and our talents are diversified; why it is crucial that young people develop critical-thinking skills about the future they want to create through public policies and programs, and that they participate in public decision making. How can we make the benefits of our public systems clear and engage people in supporting them?

Rebalancing the Equation

Why are these predilections in the public's explanatory repertoire so perilous to nonprofits? Whether you are talking about access to children's oral health programs or services for older Americans, boys' and girls' clubs or affordable housing—in each case one begins the conversation with significant conceptual deficits. The public is likely to come to the conversation without an understanding of the links between

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Perceptions of the truth
are frame dependent.
It falls to those of us who
want to work with our
neighbors, coworkers,
and all whose fate we
share to figure out how
to get ourselves back
into the commons and
reasoning together.

individual effort, environmental constraints, community assets, and the role that public policies play in solving social problems. Before the election, advocates faced many cognitive deficits when communicating with the public. It just got worse. The dominant models in our damaging election discourse let reasonable thinking off the hook and replaced it with what Daniel Kahneman calls “fast thinking”: “[W]hen faced with a difficult question, we often answer an easier one instead, usually without noticing the substitution.”²² That is, when asked to consider policies to address complex sociopolitical issues like child development, climate change, or inequality, we are likely to fall back on our comfortable bag of tricks. Self-makingness, separate fates, and business knows best will all provide “answers” of sorts. These models tell us that access to quality pre-K is less important than the child’s individual efforts; that the consequences of climate change outside my geographic view are regrettable but don’t affect me; that opening new job opportunities for displaced workers in American businesses will amply address inequality. Done. To paraphrase Kahneman, our fast thinking told us a story, and we agreed to believe it.²³

There is an alternative: *slow thinking*, or the process we go through when our old models break down and our fast thinking is interrupted. “The spontaneous search for an intuitive solution sometimes fails. . . . In such cases, we often find ourselves switching to a slower, more deliberate and effortful form of thinking,” Kahneman writes.²⁴ Nonprofit leaders know that self-makingness, separate fates, and business knows best will not stand up under scrutiny as solutions to America’s complex problems. Evoking our sociological, ecological, and civic imaginations is difficult just now, as the faster models go uncontested in the current political discourse. They need to be interrupted. And nonprofits must be both instrumental in that interruption and ready to tell better explanatory stories that link values to solutions and use the power of metaphor to explain how the world actually works.²⁵ After all, it is in the context of silence that the old cultural models are allowed to harden and dominate. Coming out of a meeting to discuss

the Obama legacy on healthcare, one participant recounted: “The president said that, you know, I guess we all could have done a better job of messaging to the American people just exactly what the value of this is to our country.”²⁶ Exactly. The value it embodies, the way it works, what impedes and propels it, with what consequences for the country. In sum, a story that elicits slow thinking.

So, what are nonprofits to do going into 2017? For starters, if we want smarter citizens, we must promote better explanations of how the world works. This is not about slogans or niche marketing. It requires real community conversations about the nature of the problems that confront us and our options in addressing them. Those conversations will likely begin in problem mode, so they require significant reframing if people are to be able to enlist slow thinking and train it on solutions. This has been the fallacy of community convenings and deliberative democracy efforts that ignore the cognitive sciences in favor of a “truth will set them free” approach. Perceptions of the truth are frame dependent. It falls to those of us who want to work with our neighbors, coworkers, and all whose fate we share to figure out how to get ourselves back into the commons and reasoning together. Remind people of the values they hold for their communities, of the places they want their children and grandchildren to enjoy, of the institutions that have served people well in the past, and of the responsibility we share in building well-being for all Americans. In true American fashion, there will be hundreds of imagined Americas that result from that thinking as we experiment with various ways to bring it about. But only slow thinking will anticipate the problem areas, put plans in place to overcome them, and lead to reengineering new approaches to what besets us all. The “two Americas” myth is a serious distraction from that mission, and one that all nonprofits should eschew.

NOTES

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