

Disrupting the Dominant Frame: An Interview with Susan Nall Bales of the FrameWorks Institute, 2015 MACEI Award Winner

Communications for nonprofits is not about “dissemination”; rather, “it is about understanding the ways that people perceive your issue.” As Susan Nall Bales explains, in order to effectively address social issues, “You have to disrupt the dominant frame and replace it with a better model of how the world works.”

Editors’ note: On February 4, it was announced that the FrameWorks Institute has been named a recipient of the 2015 MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions. Each year, the MACEI award is granted to help a number of exemplary nonprofit institutions continue “creative work” of exceptional value to society. Along with the FrameWorks Institute, the other grant recipients include: ASILEGAL (Asistencia Legal por los Derechos Humanos), in Mexico City, Mexico; Firelight, in New York City; Forest Trends, in Washington, D.C.; the Human Rights Center, at UC Berkeley School of Law; iCivics, in Washington, D.C.; the National Institute on Money in State Politics, in Helena, Montana; and the Roosevelt Institute Campus Network, in New York City.

FrameWorks was founded sixteen years ago by Susan Nall Bales. The core of its work is on how advocacy communications can be improved through the use of Strategic Frame Analysis. Bales is a veteran communications strategist and issues campaigner with more than thirty years of experience researching, designing, and implementing campaigns on high-profile social issues. The \$1 million award comes at a pivotal time for FrameWorks, as the organization prepares to expand access to its groundbreaking and incredibly useful work.

Susan Nall Bales: FrameWorks’ mission for fifteen years has been to deliver the quality research that nonprofit organizations need to effectively address social issues. Our mission has two parts: The first is to actually do the research that is necessary to inform public engagement about an issue, and the second is to teach nonprofits how to use that research.

NPQ: How important is the way that you frame an issue?

SNB: I’ve argued for twenty years that communications for nonprofits should be a front-end activity. It’s not about dissemination. It’s about understanding the ways

that people perceive your issue, and this needs to be part and parcel of your work on an issue right from the beginning.

You have two sides of a coin. You have the actual social analysis of what the problem is and what would improve conditions, but you also have the way that people perceive that problem and what they perceive the solutions to be—and those things are joined at the hip. FrameWorks tries to understand the social analysis the experts want to put forward and then tries to figure out what are the impediments in people’s minds that prevent them from engaging with the issue, understanding it, and wanting to resolve it.

NPQ: You have talked before about the power of a dominant narrative and how that is one of the things that distracts people from even the best-supported arguments. Can you talk a little bit about what people doing social justice work might be battling as they go about trying to persuade people that there are other ways to look at issues that they face?

SNB: To start with, I think that the nonprofit sector has made enormous progress in bringing social science into the way that it thinks about social problems. We do better social analysis, we look at evidence with much greater scrutiny, and we weigh policy options, I think, with

much more rigor. But communications as a social science has not enjoyed that same progress, and so I think that what we have is a black hole in our strategic toolkit that prevents us from seeing what communications is good for and how to use it. Unfortunately, the consequence of that is that we are losing battles unnecessarily. I don't mind losing, but I really, *really* don't like to lose when we don't have to.

NPQ: Can you talk about some of the issues specifically that you think continue to revert to form, despite evidence to the contrary?

SNB: Well, I think many issues do. I mean, it's just part of the way we think. We know from the work of people like Daniel Kahneman and from others who study how we think that unless our automatic thinking is disrupted—unless it doesn't prove helpful in making our ordinary day go well—we are going to default to these dominant ways of thinking . . . these folk models of how the world works. And you can't just steer them with a little slogan or a tagline, which I would say continues to be the way that we in the nonprofit sector think about communication. You have to disrupt the dominant frame and replace it with a better model of how the world works.

NPQ: Can you give an example of that in your recent work?

SNB: One example would be our work on education where, over time, ten foundations came to us and wanted to work on a new education story. But all of them had very different parts that they were funding. You know, some were in after-school programs, some were in assessment, some were in equity. I think one of the innovations that FrameWorks has brought forward is to bring those people together around a core story. It isn't just one little piece of the elephant that

you're trying to put your hand on but a new story about how education works—what it is, what it's good for, what derails its outcomes, and what would improve it.

We worked with those ten foundations and created a new story. It has a plot. It has the equivalent of "it was a dark and stormy night." It sets the stage. It has characters. It has mechanisms that are operative in the universe. It has bad guys in the narrative. It follows a narrative outline, but it isn't the old story: One kid, highly motivated by a caring teacher, pulls himself up by his bootstraps and becomes Bill Gates. That is the narrative we tend to tell ourselves. Tinkering around with that narrative is not going to get you anywhere, but substituting a different story—and, we would say, an empirically tested story—can be demonstrated to get people to a different place, where they appreciate that the system needs to be changed if you want better outcomes for most kids.

NPQ: What would be the replacement story for that basic "bootstraps" narrative that is deeply embedded in everybody's psyche in this country, and even in the psyches of people who come to this country from elsewhere? What do you try to replace that with?

SNB: The first thing I would say is that we have new tools up on our website that explain this. We provide a message memo and toolkit for explaining the new story. But basically, re the bootstraps example, what the new story does is make clear why education is a public good that society needs in order to move forward. The distinction is between education as a public good and education as an individual product that one acquires as a consumer. It sounds very simple when you think about it, but that assertion of publicness is almost invisible in media coverage of education and, to some extent, in nonprofit groups' own messaging.

NPQ: We've talked before about the idea of needing to repeat the new story and stick to it over time. Can you talk a little bit about that as a function of communication, and how important it is and how it occurs?

SNB: What's really important is telling a complete story over time and using that story—that same story—to explain multiple policy objectives. What we are doing wrong is thinking we have to have a different story for every policy "ask." What a core story does is to create a way of understanding how an issue works that would then allow you to see why multiple policy prescriptions would address that reality. There isn't enough time or money in the world to advance every policy "ask" with a new story, nor could people absorb that. So I think that's a fundamental mistake that we are making.

NPQ: I often encounter people working on the same issue but portraying that issue in many different ways, and there's a different assumption base behind each of the ways that it's portrayed.

SNB: Yes. And I would say that there's a corollary to this, which is that we think that we're branding, not framing. And so we think, for instance, that it's child care versus children's oral health. Well, that's ridiculous. If you understood what children needed, you would be able to see why quality child care is important *and* why a child needs access to regular dental care, too. You want to move toward the story that lifts all boats instead of thinking that nonprofit issues are like Coke and Pepsi, and if mine moves forward, yours has to fail. That's a bad conceptual orientation.

NPQ: Going back a bit, when you talk about empirically testing communications, what does that entail?

SNB: Here is where I really feel that we have not made the progress that we should as a sector. First, communications is seen as an art, not a science, and if it's an art then my idea of how to engage people is just as good as yours. If it's a science, then when you have your opinion I should be able to say, "Prove to me that that's going to work for me." So, FrameWorks is definitely in the empirical camp.

In the science camp, we think the artistry comes once you start to know what the message is. Then you want creative people to be able to implement that, to execute it in multiple ways. But right now what you've got is that all research is considered equal. One person's two focus groups are the same as another group's serious experimental survey. And the lack of rigor in that work and in our reflection on that work is killing us. So I think that as a sector we need to step back and look at how we view communications as an integral part of policy advocacy and what level of rigor we require in the execution of communications research.

NPQ: It really is a huge idea, and in some ways revolutionary for the sector. But it adheres in some ways to some of the trends, which are to look at research (at least to inform what you're doing) and to depend a little bit more on data to help you design the way you're going to go about doing something. I see people use communications in this way in their fundraising, but they do not necessarily bother to do that in their advocacy.

SNB: Yes, we're often called in to talk to people's direct-mail consultants. The direct-mail formula is directly counter to what social scientists say should be an issue narrative. So, they're writing things like "send money or this *x* will die." It doesn't matter whether it's manatees or child abuse victims. We've actually worked with some direct-mail folks and said, "You know, a

better story would be one that explains the underlying mechanism." So, why are critters in the oceans being pushed closer to the coastlines, where they're being unintentionally caught (and so, in other words, become more vulnerable), and what are some of the solutions that would prevent them from becoming bycatch?

So, there's an example, and the direct-mail people are so happy to have a different story. You know, they'll say to us, "Oh my God, I couldn't do that dead shark story one more time." And when you do that—when you change that direct-mail narrative—you're also educating your core constituency to be issue advocates. So, this notion that the people who give you money are different from the people who vote for your issues seems to me quite comical.

NPQ: So, you're saying that at every opportunity one has to drive that issue story home.

SNB: Yes, and wouldn't you want to figure out ways to bring your cash constituencies into your issue advocacy?

NPQ: Right.

SNB: I think we don't spend enough time on that; we simply assume that the old formulas are getting us where we want to go. I think that what FrameWorks has been about is questioning old formulas and then systematically undertaking research to find out whether they work or not.

NPQ: You're a watcher of social movements. I'm wondering if there are any examples of seizing a narrative in a frame that you've seen recently that have been impressive to you?

SNB: Let me say two things. There is a scholarship of social movement; again, it is often ignored. So, I don't think I would

be overstating it to say that I am in meetings with people who profess to understand how social movements work and to be social movement builders whose advice is at odds with what we know about the theory and practice of social movements. So, again, I think we're losing unnecessarily because we're not really paying attention to a good literature—to a good *social sciences* literature.

I thought that the campaign in the U.K. to keep Scotland part of the United Kingdom was phenomenal. If you watched the whole first part of the campaign and heard Cameron's statements, they were all about, "Don't do this, you'll die, you'll starve." And that just brought up all this Scottish resistance—from Braveheart onward: "We're Scots"; "We're used to this"; "We'll eat haggis." You know.

NPQ: Right.

SNB: Talk about playing into a default frame. I mean, the use of this punitive, scolding frame of enforced economic dependence was setting the stage for Scottish secession—as one observer said, the main message was "Do the maths and grow up." The referendum was even framed as the "No" campaign. I am told that some very smart communicators figured out this was not going well and changed the final weeks of that campaign to be about, "We need you! You are part of us. This would be a sundering of our mutual relationship." The "Better Together" campaign appealed to values of economic interdependence and longstanding cultural ties. Suddenly, the frame changed to "Don't leave us. Please stay." That was a really masterful wielding of the value of interdependence. Look at how close that was, and it didn't go the way that many people thought it would. I think it would have been far more problematic for Great Britain if that sea change in the framing had not occurred. I mean, I thought that was brilliant.

Certainly, the reframing that is closest to home is gay marriage, where we've seen a complete change in the way that is thought about. And, of course, the go-to place for a change is tobacco—which has evolved from being thought of as a personal vice to being thought of as a defective product—with many campaigners who very conscientiously made that frame change.

NPQ: When you have a very diverse field that is approaching an issue in multiple ways, and—I don't know why, I always think about the issue of poverty—how do you approach something that really has multiple, to use your word, *defective* frames being used around it? And how do you begin to overwhelm that noise to try to counter that?

SNB: That's a really good question. The way that we teach advocates and experts to think about what communications is good for is with the analogy of a swamp—that people aren't just blank receptacles; they have lots of things in them that they have pulled over time from their experiences (including their mediated experiences), from things they know, from their folk economics, etc. So you're wading into a swamp, and there are alligators in that swamp that are big dominant ideas that are going to eat your incoming information every time. And there are some orchids in the swamp—things that people are trying to grow—but there's not a lot of nurturance to help them grow.

We diagram that swamp, and we say, "Here is this cluster of ideas. These ideas, if you step in them, they are going to pull you under. But here's another cluster of ideas." And then, as we do our prescriptive work—the metaphors, values, and other frame elements that we develop—our work is tested to overcome those parts of the swamp, so that now you have tools to help you navigate around

those things and help you overcome them. This is where I think lots of people talk about "strategic communications." I don't think there's a lot of strategy in most communications. What we've tried to accomplish is a tool-to-task fit. You see the task, which is that you have to overcome a pattern of thinking; you have ways to avoid it, and you have tools that get you around it.

Here's an example. We know that people think a lot about fairness, and we know that advocates invoke fairness all the time. But fairness, in the American psyche, can mean "us versus them": "Somebody is getting something I'm not"; it can mean, "Somebody is not trying hard enough and so they're being given something." So, when you evoke fairness between individuals or fairness between groups, you're getting some of this swampy thinking that's not very helpful to you.

Over time, what FrameWorks has done is to experiment with a different kind of fairness, which is fairness across *places*—the idea that fairness is not being equally distributed, and that the distribution mechanism is faulty. Some kids in some parts of the city aren't getting the educational benefits that they need to thrive. And so the problem is not that one group should be giving their benefits to the other one; the problem is that the mechanism needs to be repaired so that fairness is being equally distributed. This has been a kind of "zip code message"—that where you're born, the part of town you're born in, shouldn't be your fate. That's a much more powerful way to overcome that swampy thinking and get people to see fairness.

NPQ: What do you think about the idea that there is a limited number of stories in the universe that we all know and glom onto? Is that in fact something we need to pay attention to—that the ways we craft our stories have to be familiar and clear enough that people can glom onto them?

SNB: That is a really good question. It is true that we know a limited number of stories and that those stories are greatly influenced by the cultures in which we live. The story that feels good to us is the story that we hear every day. We're attracted to these familiar stories, the contours of which we know so well. They are culturally specific—so in *this* culture you would say that the triumphant individual who pulls himself up from his bootstraps is the way that individualism as a value is inculcated in us in our society. But I think what many scholars would say is that you can't tell people that those stories aren't true, because you just reinforce them. You just remind people of that story.

However, you *can* build new slots in that story. I'll use an example from Roger Schank, an artificial intelligence scholar, who said, "You can't tell people that Cinderella didn't have mice." Now, in your head, you've got Cinderella and mice, right? But what you could do is say, "Did you know that Cinderella had another stepsister?" So, you can take an empty slot in a story and build it out. You can take a narrative structure that has a setting, characters, a bad guy, and a good guy, and you can turn that into a story about systems, so that the bad guy is not teachers unions in the education story—which just torches all public engagement (whether you like them or not, that's the end of the discussion about education reform) . . . but you *can* make it that the charging stations that kids need in order to learn in this society are spotty for some kids. They're not there in every community, and they're not there with the regularity that we need, and so fixing those is what we need to turn our attention to. That's a story about fixing things, and Americans are very pragmatic and practical. So, there is a way to tell stories along one part of the cultural grain while not delivering back to people the same old unhelpful story.

If I have a hobbyhorse, I would say it is the way that people talk about resonance—as in, “Does the story resonate with your audience?” What resonates is going to be the dominant story, so what you want to do is figure out something that *breaks* that story, like the unknown stepsister, and move people to rethink the story and to come out with a different outcome. So, when I hear people saying, “It has to resonate,” I think, “Oh my God, we’re dead in the water.” On kids’ issues, for example, we’re just going to be telling them that parents are responsible—and people think this because they don’t have any other way of thinking about how kids operate.

I think one of the problems here is the lack of interdisciplinarity. People who are advocating for solutions to social problems—people who are scientists and social scientists who study those social problems—live in their own niches and are not routinely in contact with people who are communications scientists. Even the communications scientists are narrowly niched. If you look at anybody who’s doing communications, if you’re lucky they’re following one academic discipline. They’re psychologists, or they’re linguists, or they’re public health people.

What FrameWorks has done—and what I’m most proud of—is to create a transdisciplinary organization. We duke it out over whether we are showing people that structures affect people’s outcomes, whether their political science methods are better than anthropological methods for getting at a particular question. So, what FrameWorks has been is one large inquiry into how to get the best theories and the best methods aligned to give you answers to the practical questions that communicators need answers to. And I don’t think anybody can do it through just one or two disciplines.

When I first started FrameWorks, I wondered why nobody else had done it before. It seemed to me a logical thing to do, and I was interested in an effort in the mid-’30s by the Rockefeller Foundation. They created The Communications Roundtable. This is really at the dawn of political psychology and understandings about propaganda, and we had this amazing array of the major social scientists in this country. I went up to Pocantico [Hills, New York], which is where the archives live, and I went through the box of minutes from those meetings.

The problem was that everyone fought each other from their disciplinary perspective. Then World War II broke out, and half of those people went into the Office of War Information. They used to pick up Margaret Mead and give her a ride into work so that they could pick her brain, because they needed some anthropological perspective! And then, after the war, they all went back to academic institutions and tried to create the same interdisciplinary conversations they had in the Office of War Information, and they were eaten alive by the academic institutions.

So, what we have done at FrameWorks is to try to create that kind of inquiry outside of the academy, recognizing that it wasn’t likely to happen inside. In our little humble way—you know, we’re roughly twenty people—we try to incentivize interdisciplinary study to reward people who get together and share their work: “See, we’ve taken *this* method and we’ve added *this* perspective to it, and when we apply this to immigration we’re getting different answers.” I don’t think you can get good message recommendations without doing that.

NPQ: Do you think that process is counterintuitive for a lot of Americans? Many people’s idea of communications is to stay on point, stay narrow, get from the beginning to the end.

SNB: There’s actually a report on our website called “Don’t Stay on Message.” It’s on the subject of immigration, supported by MacArthur. We tested whether actually staying on message when you’re attacked is effective, or whether pivoting to a second message is better—and, if so, which one. What we were able to show is that if you stay on message, you lose ground. If you pivot to a second message, you are able to counter your opposition. So, staying on message is not always the right thing to do—and this gets to that idea of a “poor story.” Instead of taking that hammer of communications and putting it on the same nail over and over and over again, you’re taking the hammer of communications to a whole set of nails that are configured like a story, and you know which one to hammer in response to which place in people’s minds they’re going to.

NPQ: This is the communications strategy of all of our dreams, and you’re one organization with twenty people. So, now what?

SNB: We have two directions we’re moving in that we think respond to that. The first is the FrameWorks Academy. A couple of years ago, with funding from MacArthur and the Kellogg Foundation, we began to invest in a state-of-the-art online course that would help people understand how metaphors work, how values work, how communications works, and what’s a good theory of change. We created a course called “Framing Fundamentals,” and it’s up on our website, available to people that may not actually ever come in contact with us otherwise. And we are creating another set of courses that build upon that, that take up issues, but they’re topical. So we’ve got one up on our site now that is on skills and learning education. There will be another one soon on immigration, and then one on human services.

You can subscribe to the courses and sit at your desk, and say, “I have no idea what these people are talking about with metaphor. I’m going to take this metaphor lesson, and then I’m going to look at what they’re saying about human services, about how to frame that.” We give you the ability to learn what *we* have learned over these years, in a very interactive way.

The second thing we’ve done has to do with feeling that we have to get ahead of the next generation of nonprofit leaders. I think we have to build their communications capacity in the places where they are learning how to think about their jobs. Additionally, we are beginning to partner with a number of academic institutions—the University of the South is one, and we expect the University of Alberta to be another—to help develop a curriculum that is used by people who are training up to become the next generation of nonprofit leaders. They’ll have some framing chops under their belts, to mix a metaphor, and they’ll understand—when they see a problem like a measles immunization backlash, for example—that four focus groups is probably not the way to attack the issue, and that you need to understand where people *are*. You need a medical anthropologist or two to come in and help you understand how people are conceptualizing immunization and how best to begin to work with them to get them to see it in a different way.

When we see the political posturing around that particular issue, the thing that is tragic is that people have so little understanding of how immunizations work that they’re confused about whether the solutions that are being put forward are good or bad ones—and that’s when you have this perceptual problem. The whole public health approach to community interdependence is being questioned and, I think, is losing ground,

because people do not have a vivid way of thinking about what that means.

NPQ: The MacArthur award comes, it seems, at a very good time for you, because it sounds like you’re able and ready to launch with a much more broadly available approach right now. Is that right?

SNB: I think that is exactly right. We’ve spent fifteen years experimenting and refining methods, and throwing things out and saying, “No, we don’t want to do it this way,” or, “We’re not going to pay attention to this scholarship because we don’t think it’s helpful,” or, “We’re going to pay attention to this,” or, “We’re going to bring that into our work.” I feel like we’re in a very good place. We still continue to experiment and innovate, but we have a strong theoretical base.

We feel confident that we have developed a tool in Strategic Frame Analysis that is useful, predictive, adaptable to multiple issues, and that can be brought forward to pretty much any type of policy issue that presents itself. Now, we don’t do anything around individual behaviors; we’re not interested in how to get your kid to sleep through the night. But we *are* interested in the degree to which noise in your community, if left unaddressed by the community, affects your kid’s sleep. So, we’re interested in those issues of how “what surrounds us shapes us,” as the California Endowment has put it — and I feel that we have a strong platform and are now ready to help other people to become conversant in the use of it and to ask better questions about how good communications research could improve their outreach, their public engagement.

Over the last couple of months, I have been in, I would say, a half dozen meetings about how to communicate on social issues, where, if I closed my eyes, I would have thought it was 1985. What tends to happen is that everyone has an

opinion—everyone. And there’s a great quote from David O. Sears:

Everyone, you will find, is an expert on public opinion; after all he is a member of the public and he knows how he feels and what he thinks about an issue. Or does he? There is a great deal about the way in which people borrow opinions, or reach down into their experience for guidance which is, even for the individual himself, out of sight. . . . We rarely think of our opinions as being formed by group memberships, forgotten childhood experiences, party labels, friendship patterns. . . . Yet, even if people were endowed with perfect self-knowledge, they might not understand what others were doing or thinking.¹

So, because there is no compass, there’s no ruler to allow you to sort what is good advice from bad advice. We just end up in this big lump, and then we generate taglines. These are high-level meetings; I’m talking about people who have the power to bring many high-level communications folks together, and that is the task—to come up with a tagline. So, clearly we are not conceptualizing communications at the level we need to in order to make progress. The MacArthur award makes me cautiously optimistic that we can turn this page and become better nonprofit communicators about social problems and their solutions.

NOTES

1. Robert E. Lane and David O. Sears, *Public Opinion* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc.), 1964, v.

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