

# Reframing Issues in the Digital Age: Using Social Media Strategically

by Julie Sweetland, PhD, and Rob Shore

The framing,  
or often  
reframing,  
of a social issue  
must be  
repeated regularly,  
by many,  
and in various  
locations  
for it to  
begin dominating  
the public's  
understanding  
of the issue; and  
social media  
is enormously  
useful in  
helping the  
frame to "set."

ONE OF A SOCIAL ADVOCATE'S MOST CRITICAL ACTS is to frame an issue. In framing, a communicator uses language, metaphor, and other means to bring the community into the issue in a particular way. So, for instance, tobacco control advocates reframed tobacco from a "personal vice" narrative, in which the public discourse centered around individual choice and behavior, to a "defective product" narrative, in which the role of corporate malfeasance and the need for protective regulations became clear. Reframing an issue is hard work, as frames are socially shared and persist over time; but it is worth it, because public opinion and policy preferences are frame dependent. The stories nonprofit communicators tell have the power to make the public more or less supportive of positive

changes—for instance, in the way we support human health and well-being, distribute society's resources, and redress long-standing injustices.

Thinking carefully about the frames we reinforce or disrupt by virtue of our storytelling is all the more important in an era in which nonprofits possess more control than ever before over the means of diffusing ideas. The majority of nonprofit organizations now use social media tools to communicate with the public about the issues related to their missions—and for good reason. Evidence from the Pew Research Center's *Civic Engagement in the Digital Age* suggests that our public square is now largely virtual: the number of social networking site users grew from 33 percent of the online population in 2008 to 69 percent in 2012.<sup>1</sup> Many users say that their activity on social networking sites has prompted them to learn more about social issues and to take action on those issues. But what does meaningful issue engagement look like in the sphere of social media?

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If your Twitter feed reads  
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Chicken Little, it's time  
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Engine That Could.

Too often, nonprofits have mistaken self-promotion and “click bait” as meaningful contributions to the public conversation on complex issues. “Clicks,” “views,” and “likes” only mean so much if the story they carry isn’t helping people to understand the causes of and solutions to complex social issues. More and more, organizations tackling tough social justice issues are recognizing that not just participating in but also changing the conversation is essential to achieving and sustaining meaningful impact. Put another way, issue advocates are increasingly looking to engage more effectively in frame contests, shaping their messages to advance a more productive narrative on public issues through the selective use of the messengers as well as the language, symbols, visuals, and other elements of communication that impart meaning and structure understanding.

But can these two elements of a communications strategy reinforce one another? How can reframing social issues take place in social media?

At the FrameWorks Institute, these are questions we hear often in our professional learning opportunities for nonprofit leaders and other issue advocates. As we work together to build the communications capacity of their organizations, we explore answers using the perspective of Strategic Frame Analysis™, which roots communications practice in the cognitive and social sciences.<sup>2</sup> Our first answer is that framing is already happening in social media—because there is no such thing as frameless communication. The practical dilemma, therefore, isn’t whether or not to frame on Facebook but rather whether the frames already in the feed result in a narrative that will support the organization’s broader goals. By looking at the framing recommendations that emerge from FrameWorks’ original communications research—as well as at the work of leading scholars in the literature on social movements, social and behavioral psychology, political science, and other disciplines that diffuse new ways of thinking—we find evidence-based answers to such practical challenges facing nonprofit communicators as how to effectively talk about a complex issue in 140 characters or less.

Below, we highlight a few ways that social media efforts can go awry, and offer some suggestions for how to maximize the opportunity to self-publish the kinds of messages that support your organization’s overall communications strategy and, ultimately, your mission and vision. Our focus is on the framing of messages—the choices about what to emphasize and what to leave unsaid and the selection of the narrative, values, metaphors, and other elements that shape the understanding that results from the communication.

### Are Your Posts Contributing to “Compassion Fatigue”?

If your Twitter feed reads as if it were being run by Chicken Little, it’s time to hand over the password to The Little Engine That Could. As media scholar Susan Moeller has shown—and numerous other social scientists concur—a steady stream of crisis messaging depletes people’s will and ability to engage with social problems.<sup>3</sup> While crisis frames can generate clicks, the emotions and understanding they inspire tend to be either fleeting or fatalistic. On the other hand, framing problems so that underlying causes and public solutions are easy to understand offers people ways to appreciate how programming, policy, and civic engagement might make a difference.

By shaping social media posts to support a larger narrative emphasizing that there are solutions beyond problems, nonprofits can avoid draining the public’s “finite pool of worry” and begin replenishing supporters’ well of willingness to engage.<sup>4</sup>

**Avoid:** *Latest statistics on elder abuse are just heartbreaking—what if this were your grandmother? <http://samplelink>*

**Advance:** *Seniors are mistreated more often than we think. Some states made a difference with this commonsense approach: <http://samplelink>*

## Are Your Posts Zooming In on Individuals, Leaving Systems Out of the Frame?

The conscientious reframing of issues is imperative for galvanizing public support and for establishing effective policy. Political scientist Shanto Iyengar has shown, for example, that how people think about poverty depends on the way the issue is framed.<sup>5</sup> When poverty is framed structurally, people assign responsibility to society at large; when framed episodically, focusing on the circumstances of a specific poor person, people assign responsibility to the individual.

FrameWorks research shows that the American public tends to understand most issues in terms of individual actors, characteristics, and choices. For example, Americans model the education system through the “tangible triad” of students, teachers, and parents—leaving factors such as funding, curriculum, policy, and leadership all but invisible.<sup>6</sup> Yet, people can also quickly grasp a systemic view with the help of frame elements such as metaphors, which allow them to take the working parts of something they understand and apply them to unfamiliar or abstract issues. (You can get social context into your social media without metaphors, of course, by eschewing tales of triumphant individuals or tragic figures in favor of more thematic stories that bring environments, systems, structures, and policies into the picture.)

**Avoid:** *Amazing #teachers will come 2gether to pour their hearts + minds into students this school year! RT if you love teachers!*

**Advance:** *Learning = construction project so teachers need strong scaffolding. This program <http://samplelink> offers critical support, an #edreform must!*

## Is Your Social Media Feed Saying, “Enough about You; Let’s Talk about Me”?

While nonprofits must dedicate some portion of their external communications to building their visibility and reputation, recruiting for programs, and otherwise “keeping the lights on,” too much

self-promotion or fundraising can hamper rather than build public engagement. Useful and educational posts should vastly outnumber self-referential ones, so that when an opportunity for self-promotion arises, your audience feels that it has gotten good value for its attention and time overall. More importantly, organizations interested in creating social change also learn to take every opportunity to lift up a reframed perspective on their issue, even when doing something as mundane as announcing an event. Don’t be afraid to experiment with a stronger dose of advocacy messaging. Recent surveys of online behavior suggest that the public considers social networking sites an important means of receiving and posting news and ideas on sociopolitical issues.<sup>7</sup>

**Less:** *Our very own @executivedirector offered insight into our #issue on this exciting panel: <http://samplelink>*

**More:** *This (<http://samplelink>) gave us lots 2 think abt. @executivedirector: “We need the talents of all to be available to our communities.”*

## Is Your Social Media Content Taking Too Much for Granted?

“Most people don’t think about most issues most of the time,” wrote Nelson Polsby and Aaron Widalvsky, in a famous analysis of American public opinion.<sup>8</sup> The average person has little daily contact with most topics on the public agenda, and, as a result, the stories about social issues are often partial, inaccurate, or outdated. In a recent research project probing ordinary citizens’ thinking about threats to the oceans, FrameWorks found widespread confusion between carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide, leading people to conclude that climate change would cause mass suffocation.<sup>9</sup> In another study on the social determinants of health, we found that few people could name influences on health beyond diet and exercise.<sup>10</sup>

Typical nonprofit messaging doesn’t help the public get smarter about issues; FrameWorks’ systematic reviews of nonprofit communications have revealed a ubiquitous “invisible process”

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frame: how causes lead to consequences is left out entirely. Yet, our research has also shown that people can quickly grasp expert insights and begin to reason using research-based concepts, as long as they have a well-framed explanation using metaphors or causal sequences. Explanation is a worthy and important goal for nonprofit communications: it can help people to become more informed and more effective advocates for change. In this context, sharing news about a particular aspect of an issue can either help or hinder the public's understanding of how your issue works at the most fundamental level. If you imagine your social media posts as a set of mini-lessons for people who know little or nothing about your issue, how would you change your approach to them? If you think of your most important content as an overarching umbrella awareness campaign that teaches how the world works when it comes to your issue, what kinds of ideas should you share more often?

**Avoid:** @studyauthor's new report shows that atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> concentration reaches 401 PPM: <http://samplelink>

**Advance:** Use of fossil fuels for energy causes rampant CO<sub>2</sub> to build up, trapping heat worldwide. Learn more from @studyauthor: <http://samplelink>

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As the world of mass communications moves away from a broadcast model of information sharing to a networked, social engagement model, the tools of opinion making are now in the hands of advocates. But the medium is not the message, and the tools, if not used with care, can have little—or even harmful—effect. Every nonprofit's communications plan should consider the larger frames that attend to its issue and a strategy for reframing the issue, ideally looking to research that can help communicators understand which frames to advance and which to avoid—and why. Once the broader communications goals and framing strategies are clear, social networking sites can become a channel for diffusing potent reframed messages into the community of followers and friends.

## NOTES

1. Aaron Smith, *Civic Engagement in the Digital Age*, Pew Research Center, 2013, [http://www.pewinternet.org/files/old-media/Files/Reports/2013/PIP\\_CivicEngagementintheDigitalAge.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/files/old-media/Files/Reports/2013/PIP_CivicEngagementintheDigitalAge.pdf).
2. Developed by the FrameWorks Institute, Strategic Frame Analysis™ is an evidence-based approach to communications on complex social and scientific issues. For more information, see [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org).
3. Susan D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War, and Death* (New York: Routledge, 1999).
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10. Susan Nall Bales, Volmert, and Adam Simon, *Overcoming Health Individualism: A FrameWorks Creative Brief on Framing Social Determinants in Alberta*, internal FrameWorks Institute research report, 2014.

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