Framing COVID-19

Topic #8: Keeping democratic ideals alive during the pandemic

To come through this crisis, we need democracy to work as it should. We need representatives who look ahead and look out for us all. We need institutions that prioritize public health, not private interests. We need government that responds to our needs and respects the limits on its power.

The way we talk about leaders, leadership, and institutions now sets the context for what comes next. We won’t revitalize democracy by leaving people to assume that politics is, and always will be, broken beyond repair. But if we remind people of our democratic ideals—and show how they connect to this crisis and our future beyond it—we can rebuild demand for leaders and systems that put people first.

Here are three framing strategies that can help us inspire a recommitment to democracy.

1. Lift up democratic values.

Our democratic ideals are powerful motivators. Use language that activates shared values early and often in communications. By centering democratic values in our communications, we keep them front of mind for people—and help them to endure.

There is no shortage of stories we could tell about how democratic principles have been violated by arbitrary, partisan, self-interested, or profit-driven decisions during this crisis. But dramatizing bad behavior at the top can obscure the importance of a strong underlying foundation.

Look for opportunities to affirm and elaborate on cherished values like integrity and transparency. Remind people that we can and should expect our leaders to act in the public interest. Focus on principles, not problematic personalities.
Instead of listing the ways good governance has been violated

"The number of missteps by this administration practically outpaces the number of infections, which are now close to 1 million: Downplaying the risk. Using the virus as an excuse to pursue an anti-immigrant agenda. Touting ineffective or dangerous methods while sidelining scientists. Watering down recommendations from public health experts so they don’t cut into corporate bottom lines. When will his allies and supporters say enough is enough?"

Center the value and show how it is threatened

"In a democracy, we count on our public institutions to operate with integrity. They are meant to follow enduring laws, not temporary or personal impulses. The pandemic has shown us how vital it is to safeguard institutions from being misused for narrow political ends. It hurts us all when elected officials interfere with life-saving advice to protect their friends or garner political support. We need and deserve public agencies that do the right thing for the right reasons."

2. Make the truth compelling and clear.

Misinformation doesn’t just misinform us. It distracts us. It undermines the very idea of a verifiable reality, which is essential to democratic deliberation. This helps to explain why autocratic leaders undermine those who pursue and promote evidence, like journalists and scientists.

The way we respond to misinformation in this moment can either further erode trust or rebuild understanding. We can inadvertently push people to settle for less, or we can restore the expectation that leaders tell the truth.

Leaders who deploy misinformation do so strategically to create an atmosphere of uncertainty and to lure us away from more important issues and actions. We should be just as strategic in selecting the instances of misinformation we tackle. Generally, it’s better to find ways to redirect our collective attention. In most cases, the best way to kill a myth is to starve it of attention.

This isn’t always possible. When there is an unavoidable need to address misinformation head on, never repeat the untruth—even to point out faults and flaws in it. Instead, use this formula:

- Lead with and repeat the truth, expressing it clearly and succinctly.
- Expand on the truth with a concise explanation of what it means and why it matters.
- Move on to an issue that deserves attention, like what we need to do next.
Instead of attempting to rebut and correct

"They say millions of coronavirus tests are available, but this couldn’t be further from the truth. Anyone paying attention can see we are a far cry from the the millions of on-demand tests we were promised and assured of. The latest reliable assessment of our testing capabilities suggests there are just a few hundred thousand nationally. When you divide this figure by the number of people in the country, it doesn’t get anywhere close to enough."

Say what’s true, explain what it means, and move on to what should be done

"We have too few tests to know what we’re dealing with. The lack of tests means a lack of information about how to best slow the spread of the virus. We can all see the truth: We simply aren’t getting access to the tests we need. Our leaders can choose to make this right. There are steps they can take today to make more tests available and make sure more people are screened."

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3. Show how issues and incidents are connected.

To build concern about anti-democratic tactics during the pandemic, we need to widen our reach and broaden the audiences who hear our perspective. We need to make it clear that the threat is to democracy writ large, not only to this issue or that one. When we illustrate how power-grabbing strategies are used repeatedly in different situations, we create the conditions for solidarity.

To do this, we can organize our stories around a theme—like the failure to set strong worker protections—rather than treating the dangers facing grocery store workers as separate from the problem of outbreaks in meat processing plants. This helps us all see the forest, not just the trees.

Explain a general way that leaders are putting narrow interests above the common good—through privatization, for instance—and then give specific examples that cut across issues.

Instead of missing opportunities to connect one issue to another

"Corporations are taking advantage of the coronavirus crisis to further privatize education, which should be a public good. As just one example, the CEO of a for-profit online education business recently boasted to investors that the "upside of the pandemic" is a big boost their bottom line. Funding privatization of our schools right now may be good for businesses, but it’s not good for kids. And it’s anti-democratic. Private educational ventures have less transparency and less incentive to ensure that they serve all children."

Make it impossible to miss how issues are intertwined

"Our democracy works best when education and information are available to us all, regardless of our ability to pay. As we work quickly to shore up our economy, we have to protect the things we value and need. Emergency funding is, unfortunately, underwriting some companies’ attempts to corner the market on online learning, mail delivery, and other essential services. This isn’t the time to privatize public services. Every response policy we set must put people and the public interest first."
About this series

In this uniquely challenging moment, we need to connect people to the bigger picture. We need ways to explain health, enhance community, and offer hope.

We’re pulling guidance from twenty years of framing research and practice to help advocates and experts be heard and understood in a time of global crisis. Every week, we’ll share a few ideas that can help us all amplify the values of justice, inclusion, and interdependence.

To suggest topics, share ideas, or ask questions, talk to @FrameWorksInst on Twitter.
You can review previous topics or share the sign-up link with a friend.
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