The polarized pandemic

Topic #12: How to foster solidarity while others fuel division

The pandemic has demonstrated that we are capable of cooperation at a scale that few of us imagined possible. We have all been inspired by stories that show how difficulty can bring out the best in humanity.

But we are also—increasingly—hearing stories of heated protests and hostile confrontations over public health guidance. We're seeing people pointedly disregarding physical distancing recommendations. Face coverings have become unlikely, but potent, triggers for virulent, and even violent, reactions.

Division and doubt undermine the collective action we need to make it through and recover from the pandemic. Once an issue has been successfully positioned as a flashpoint in a "culture war," productive public discussion of policy options becomes next to impossible.

As social change communicators, we can respond strategically to this.

The choices we make about what to emphasize—and what to leave unsaid—can deepen divisions, or dampen them. They can erode the cooperative spirit needed to spare lives and suffering during the pandemic and the ensuing recovery—or they can shore it up.

Here are three ways we can avoid fueling polarization over public health guidance and open up space for ideas and action.

1. **Focus on advancing your big ideas.**

   During the pandemic, political controversy and conflict stories come at a cost: they distract from critical public health discussions. If partisan confrontation comes to dominate discussions of the pandemic, it will crowd out ideas that we need to flourish right now: solidarity, equity, and redesigning our economies.
Engaging in culture war commentary around the pandemic isn’t the best use of our limited opportunities to reshape public perceptions during this unusual moment in time. A steady stream of stories analyzing polarization doesn’t wash it away—it channels energy and attention to it. Most people want to stay out of rhetorical conflicts, preferring discourse that is inclusive. We can offer them a chance to join a conversation.

We need to focus, not fracture, our stories. Cut through the chaos by staying on message. Stay focused on important ideas about the pandemic itself and how we need to respond to solve problems.

**Instead of commenting on the chaos**

"It’s heartbreaking to see us turning against each other as we deal with the tragedy and hardship brought on by COVID-19. But we must look at how we got here. Those in power have used a deadly pandemic to pit people against each other, for their own political gain. As the coronavirus death toll has skyrocketed, they have stoked division and fear. They have cast doubt over the most basic scientific truths and fueled a deadly battle between fact and folly. We will all pay the price for the culture wars we find ourselves in—and many will pay with their lives."

**Cut through with what really matters**

"The COVID-19 crisis has shown how vital it is that our governments are prepared to protect us from harm—and to take action in a focused, far-sighted way. At this critical moment in the pandemic, we need government to concentrate its attention and action on what lies ahead. This means putting people’s wellbeing first, setting policies and issuing health guidance based on evidence. It means doing the hard work of redesigning our economies around what we really value: greater security, fuller participation, and a healthy environment."

### 2. Keep using a big, generous "we."

The most powerful response to divisive voices is to maintain a stance of interdependence.

Keep making the pandemic a story about solidarity and our shared resolve to do what’s right. Stick to talking about everyone’s wellbeing. Show that your concern is for everyone, not just those who agree with you or those who are following the rules.

Don’t let *us-vs-them* triggers creep into your pandemic communications, even in efforts to connect with your audience. Judgmental, emotional reactions (outrage, indignation, shock) invite defensiveness. They nudge people to identify with one group and dismiss or devalue others.

**Instead of blaming and shaming**

"The people who refuse to wear masks may not be afraid of contracting the virus. But that fearlessness comes at a cost for every single person around them. They may feel that their comfort has been sacrificed. But their personal comfort is not more important

**Invite people to understand how we need to cooperate**

"The pandemic has shown us how everyone’s health depends on cooperation. As we begin to move through society more, we must keep working together to slow the spread of virus. One vital action is covering our mouths and noses when in public. Droplets from our
than public health. They may believe that they have a right to resist enforcement, or that their liberties are being threatened. But now more than ever, we all need to respect rules meant to protect us all. And freedom comes with the responsibility to respect the rights of others to live free from unreasonable dangers."

3. Respond strategically to instances of public health non-compliance.

Perceptions of what others are (or aren’t) doing matter tremendously. These perceptions inform our behavior and attitudes. Given that such perceptions have life-or-death effects during the pandemic, it’s critical that our communications help shape social norms that work in the interests of public health.

When we share vivid stories or images of ‘bad behavior’ we give the false impression that it is widespread—and therefore, socially acceptable. This makes it easier for people to justify ignoring public health guidance.

Stories of "those people" engaging in health behavior that threatens "us" come with other risks, too. They give rise to rancor and deepen divisions. They heighten the atmosphere of fear—and relocate its source, from the virus to each other.

We need to be careful in deciding whether, when, and how to share stories about behavior that's out of step with public health measures. In most cases, our energy is best spent on normalizing the kinds of actions that are necessary to reduce harm, save lives, and drive a just recovery.

Instead of dramatizing stories of rule-breaking

"Despite warnings from infectious disease experts to avoid crowds, some among us just can't seem to help themselves. Over the holiday weekend, we saw people flock to pubs and clubs, and revel on beaches and in crowded pools. Many rejected the idea that the virus was a serious threat—or claimed not to care if they suffered the worst. Our politicians egged them on—through encouraging words or their own choices to ignore public health recommendations. Their actions and words reveal just how little they care for our lives."

Normalize what people and governments should be doing

"As a nation we're staying the course because we know what's at stake—everyone’s health and wellbeing. With the virus still present, straying from the path now would jeopardize lives and make economic recovery harder. This is why we're looking to our leaders for clear and consistent guidance that protects our health. We're looking for creative approaches to strengthening communities in this difficult time. We're looking for the compassion to support the people hurting the most, and the courage to drive a recovery plan that puts people 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.