



Unleashing the Power of How:

An Explanation Declaration

2019



20 YEARS

Celebrating 20 years of
social science for social change.

About this declaration

Twenty years ago, the FrameWorks Institute was founded as a response to [An Open Letter to the Foundation Community about the Importance of Strategic Communications for the Resolution of Social Problems](#). In this document, a group of communications theorists and strategists pointed out that communications had been marginalized in social change strategies and challenged philanthropy to rethink its approach:

“A decade of social science research strongly suggests that current unexamined practices of mass media may be critical stumbling blocks to the reengagement of American citizens in common ground problem solving. . . . Current communications funding and practice by grantees has the effect of isolating communications from planning, from situation analyses, and from policywork. Communications analysis — how the public understands a given social problem and how news coverage contributes to this understanding — must be brought to the front of the strategic planning process and regarded by all as a key element of capacity building.”

The Open Letter charted a course for integrating social science into social change strategies, beginning with careful scrutiny of conventional wisdom about communications practice.

For two decades, FrameWorks has explored that path, building the mission-driven sector’s capacity for evidence-informed social change communications. In this time, we have conducted more than 300 original studies of public thinking, public discourse, and effective framing of social issues — a body of work that has included more than 400,000 members of the public. In the course of building this evidence base and working with foundations, advocacy organizations, and coalitions to apply its insights, we have developed and refined a theory of social change communications. As a result of our work, funders and grantees, scientists and social policy experts, and advocates and community organizers across six continents have integrated communications theory and research into their strategies for social change. Across the mission-driven sector, communications is no longer an afterthought focused on dissemination but rather a front-end activity in which sophisticated research informs strategy early in the creative process.

We are proud to have been part of this transformation. But progress brings new conventions and unexamined practices. It is again time to challenge what we have come to take for granted and re-examine the role that communications can play in achieving our goals.

We envision a nation in which ordinary people succeed in holding institutions and systems accountable for effective, equitable responses to social problems. In this Explanation Declaration, we argue that this vision can be achieved only when people have a deep, robust understanding of the dynamics at work in social issues. Effective solutions can only be found when a strong knowledge base informs the judgment of both leaders and the civic body. Equitable solutions can only be won when people perceive the structural nature of social problems and see meaningful policies — not merely individual actions — as the necessary response.

Explanation is a uniquely powerful tool for building people’s understanding of social issues. The **“power of how”** is an asset that advocates cannot afford to ignore.

What is – and isn't – explanation?

Explanation differs from definition and description, though it may incorporate aspects of both.

A definition of an issue names its distinguishing characteristics; it sets boundaries around a concept, delineating its edges and helping us see what it is and is not.

A description of an issue is often a list, perhaps an enumeration of data; it seeks to represent the scope and characteristics of the problem and its effects.

An **explanation** of an issue, in contrast, invites people to understand how something works. It illuminates process. It makes mechanisms visible and clarifies connections. As a result, explanation yields a remarkably strong base for judgment.

Effective explanation is hard. And it requires us, as communicators, to rethink this undervalued concept.

Explanation does not have to be lengthy or complicated. In fact, a good explanation makes complex or abstract ideas more concrete and easier to understand. An explanation does not merely assert a relationship between a cause and its effect but shows how one leads to the other. A well-crafted explanation sparks the satisfying sense of grasping the issue at hand. Eyes don't glaze over — they flash with "aha!" Explanation is not about showing off knowledge; it is about inviting others into it.

Why does explanation matter?

Explanation matters because it helps people recognize injustice and embrace meaningful approaches to solving social problems. Most people have a thin understanding of the causes and effects of most social issues. Lacking ways to think about how systems and structures cause and underlie a problem, people tend to blame more familiar causes: **personal effort** and **individual choice**. Americans reduce the education system to the will and behavior of students, teachers, and parents — leaving factors such as funding, curriculum, policy, and leadership invisible. People across the United Kingdom think of poverty as the result of poor people's poor choices. Once such satisfying ways of thinking come to mind, people are unlikely to go further

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and consider factors like economic shifts, uneven access to education, or changes to social supports and funding systems.

The way we understand cause shapes our perception of appropriate responses. If we think poor educational outcomes are the results of students, teachers, or parents who don't care enough about education, then we conclude that well-matched responses involve shifting the priorities of these individuals. As a result, policy and practice solutions double down on discipline or try to manufacture motivation — think homework incentive schemes or family-school contracts. If we think poverty is caused by bad decisions, then we look to solutions that involve getting people to make better decisions. When people assume that a social problem is caused by the character or constitution of the people most directly affected by it, they fail to see structural causes — differences in power, opportunity, resources, adversity, and needs across social groups. In turn, changes to any of these structural dynamics are either missed, or dismissed, as potential solutions.

These insights have implications for advocacy communications. FrameWorks reviews hundreds of progressive advocacy communications each year, and we find that they are more likely to describe the extent of social problems than to explain their causes and consequences. Consider this typical example:

In 2010, 18 out of every 1,000 men in the United States were in prison, making it the world's largest jailer. By contrast, four of every 1,000 men in Great Britain and 14 of every 1,000 men in the Russian Federation were in prison. We need criminal justice reform.

This communication assumes that describing the size of the disparity between the United States and other countries will compel people to engage with the issue and see the importance of structural change. The assumption is that people will recognize that being the world's largest jailer is antithetical to our values, assign responsibility for the disparity to systemic factors, and see the need for serious structural reform.

But this isn't how it works. When we tested this kind of problem statement, we found that it did not move Americans to reject mass incarceration or endorse progressive justice reforms.¹ Instead, it left people to fill in cause with their explanations —

that our law enforcement approaches must be better than other countries at catching criminals, for example — and to continue to support policies that were out of line with advocates' goals. And while these communications outcomes are troubling, they are both frequent and unsurprising. The problem statement lacks explanation. The message does not help people understand the cause of these discrepancies. It is not explanatory.

In contrast, we found that an explanation of the causes and consequences of the growth of incarceration in the United States led people to question the status quo and support progressive change. Similarly, an explanation of implicit bias led people to reject punitive approaches to school discipline in favor of restorative justice models.²

By specifying what leads to what, and to what end — the process that connects causes to outcomes — communicators help the public understand the root causes of problems, recognize broader impacts, and see why certain solutions lead to meaningful change.

Why do explanations shift understanding?

In order to create explanations that work, we need to understand how the mind processes information.

The renowned psychologist Daniel Kahneman, in distinguishing between "fast" and "slow" thinking, shows how our habitual patterns of information-processing can impede critical analysis.³

Fast thinking (what Kahneman calls System 1 thinking) "creates a coherent pattern of activated ideas in associative memory; is adept at finding a coherent story that links the fragments of knowledge at its disposal."

Slow thinking (System 2) is deliberate and orderly. Our brain resists putting in this type of effort, but can be jolted into action "when the first system encounters something it can't handle, like a surprise, threat, curiosity, or learning situation."⁴

Importantly, the thinking produced by System 1 is not necessarily simpler — it is only more accessible, computed more quickly and easily.

The fast and slow thinking dichotomy is consistent with a model of persuasion developed by psychologists Richard Petty and John Cacioppo. They distinguish between two cognitive routes by which people come to conclusions. When people are inattentive or distracted, or otherwise have low motivation to think about a message, attempts at persuasion are processed through a "peripheral route," yielding short-term effects (if any). For "lasting change that resists fading and counterattacks," messages must be processed through the "central route," which focuses considerable attention on the quality of the message and its arguments. That route requires high motivation and the ability to engage with a message.

Both dualisms distinguish between messages that summon dominant ways of thinking and evade thoughtful consideration, on one hand, and those that force an effortful reconsideration.

If social change communicators don't invite slow thinking, our public discourse — and therefore our public policy — is limited by fast thinking, which is by definition remarkably consistent with the status quo.

The way to block errors of judgment that originate in fast thinking is, Kahneman says, to “recognize that you are in a cognitive minefield, slow down, and ask for reinforcement from System 2.” Put simply, the more superficial the

“explanation,” the less likely it is to force a reappraisal or to change minds about a social issue.

Kahneman finds that “the confidence that people experience is determined by the coherence of the story they manage to construct from available information.” So, in order for an explanation to “work,” it must include enough motivating content to make reappraisal more rewarding than the fast and frugal processing of System 1.

How does explanation relate to System 2? Generalizing from multiple studies investigating the effects of explanatory techniques on public thinking about social issues, FrameWorks researchers offer a typology of tasks for explanation:⁵

1 Explanations can deepen thinking that is productive, but shallow.

Explanation can help translate vaguely positive sentiments into more informed, more enthusiastic support. For instance, we found that Americans consistently expressed the belief that all elements of nature are connected but struggled to give examples of how that connection worked. The model of connection existed, but it was too vague to apply to think things through. We found that this hampered people's ability to engage with some of the most immediate impacts of a changing climate, such as its effect on human health. Explanations focused on laying out cause-and-effect sequences: for instance, in warmer weather, insects and ticks thrive, and the risks of insect-borne diseases increase. The result was increased support for a range of policies, from reducing reliance on fossil fuels to increasing public health resources. By beefing up “barely there” models, explanation can cultivate greater engagement with complex issues and build support for a wider range of policy responses to problems with multiple dimensions.

2 Explanation can foreground ways of thinking that are robust and productive — but rarely called to mind.

Explanations can pull neglected mental models from the back of the mind's closet, dust them off, and push them into a primary position in people's thinking about an issue. Take the example of two competing ways of thinking about people's role in society: people as consumers and people as citizens. System 1 reaches again and again for the model of people as consumers — a result of the way this mode of thinking is continually activated by media, advertising, and dominant narratives. This way of thinking leads people to see social problems as glitches in marketplace transactions, or worse, as the natural state of a free market doing what it should. Explanation can help foreground the model of people as citizens with collective power, a model that encourages people to think about responses to social problems that are public, not private, in nature. By bringing productive yet recessive cultural models forward, explanation can cultivate helpful perspectives that are not regularly empowered in social discourse.

3 Explanations can fill cognitive holes.

Sometimes, people lack a way to think about an issue; there simply isn't a mental model to work from. Our US research on the issue of aging provides an example. In hundreds of hours of individual interviews and group discussions — conversations that covered a wide range of topics related to growing older — rarely, if ever, questioned negative stereotypes of aging. In experts' minds, ageism is a central organizing principle; in the public mind, a blank spot exists where associations with age-related discrimination might otherwise be. It isn't that people disagree with the assertion of ageism; it is that they are unlikely to have heard the term or know the concept by another name. In this and other cases like it, the cognitive hole is best filled with a robust explanation that gives people a working model they can use to make sense of experiences and communications.

Differentiating between these three explanatory tasks is useful, as the techniques for redirecting attention from one model to another may differ from those that work to supply understanding where models are lacking. But more important than the distinctions is the shared thread. Whenever robust, productive ways of thinking aren't well practiced and available, explanation is needed.



Explanation's Toolkit

What communications techniques can be used for explanation? Over 20 years, FrameWorks has expanded and refined a set of tools specifically designed for explanation.

Each has been tested across multiple issue areas, through multiple research methods, in partnerships with a range of advocates and scientists, and applied in numerous campaigns. All of these techniques help non-specialists benefit from the perspective of issue insiders, inviting them to follow a new line of reasoning rather than sticking to the cognitive shortcuts they usually rely on to make meaning. For simplicity's sake, we've offered illustrations on a single theme — affordable housing — but the tools themselves work for any issue.

1. Explanatory Chains

Explanatory chains offer an unbroken linear path of logic where Idea A leads to Idea B, which leads to Idea C, and so on, connecting causes to consequences and building up shared understanding. Explanatory chains make implicit assumptions explicit. They use causal transition words and tightly connected sentences to close gaps that the public might otherwise fill in with their own ways of thinking.

An Explanatory Chain for Affordable Housing

- Because housing plays such an important role in community wellbeing, our federal budget includes funds to help Americans buy or rent their homes. These resources provide tax breaks and loan guarantees and support other housing-related programs.
- ✓ Right now, very little of this money goes to people with lower incomes. In fact, less than a quarter of government housing resources go to households making less than \$40,000 a year.
- ✓ One effect is that people with less money must spend a greater proportion of their incomes on housing. This puts them at a disadvantage in other areas of life, as they have less to devote to things like education and health.
- ✓ Our current policy approach gives the least help to those who need it most. We can change this. In a time when housing costs are rising more quickly than incomes, we should make it a priority to ensure that everyone can secure a decent place to live.

2. Explanatory Examples

Explanatory examples are concrete illustrations of a concept that are easy for people to remember and pass on. Well-framed examples dislodge unproductive assumptions and point toward solutions.

- Race, wealth, and affordable housing are connected — and have been for most of American history. After World War II, the GI Bill guaranteed housing loans for veterans. White veterans were able to use this government backing to buy homes in the suburbs, where prices were rising.
- ✓ But Black veterans, for the most part, weren't able to make use of the housing provisions. Banks generally wouldn't make loans for mortgages in Black neighborhoods, and Black people were excluded from the suburbs by a combination of formal racial restrictions on home sales and informal discrimination.
- ✓ Today, Black mortgage applicants are more likely than white applicants to receive subprime loans with high interest rates, even if they have the same financial background.

3. Explanatory Metaphors

Explanatory metaphors use what people know about familiar objects or experiences to help them understand an abstract, unfamiliar, or misunderstood system or process. Carefully developed comparisons allow people to grasp concepts quickly and get to surprisingly deep understandings. Metaphors are memorable and "sticky," and people love to extend them.

- Designing a vibrant, inclusive community is like solving a puzzle. If a community doesn't have key pieces — like good homes that people can afford, places to get health care, dependable public transportation, and strong schools — the puzzle doesn't fit together and can't be completed.
- ✓ If commercial, for-profit developers are the only people making decisions about which pieces go where, whole groups of people get left out of the picture.
- ✓ Government has an important role to play here — for example, regulations and zoning set the borders of the puzzle — but there's more to fill in to see the kinds of communities we want and need.

While these tools work well, we encourage the development of additional explanatory techniques that can advance support for social justice solutions. But each tool — explanatory chains, metaphors, and examples — has evidence behind it, having demonstrated the power to help people connect social problems to meaningful collective solutions.

Explanation can power our narratives

In the 20 years since the Open Letter, the idea of narrative has emerged and evolved to become the primary way that advocates think about social change communications.

Countless books, blogs, and trainings offer advice about using narratives for change. National research efforts are devoted to illuminating dominant and counter-narratives. We all pay attention to the stories we tell — to ourselves, to each other, through media, and in communities.

So pervasive is this trend that Nonprofit Quarterly named 2018 “the year of the narrative.” That observation was not without a warning against narrative as a “faddish fetish.” As Rashad Robinson, executive director of Color of Change, asserts: “Narrative builds power for people or it is not useful at all.”⁶

We agree. It is imperative that, as a field, we examine the way we define and use narrative to ensure that it delivers the social change we seek. And we believe there are critical flaws in narrative practice that limit our ability to realize this vision.

For a communication to qualify as story, some one or some thing must act or be acted upon and thereby propelled toward an ultimate result. It is tempting for advocates to satisfy these demands of plot by resorting to human interest stories. It’s the easiest way, after all, to fill in a “someone” and capture interest. But human interest stories are insufficient to drive change. While the human brain is attracted to tales of episodes in other people’s lives, the civic body is distracted by them. In contemplating close-up portraits of affected individuals, the broader landscape of systems and structures is readily ignored. In fact, stories of affected individuals can harm support for a cause. As social scientists have demonstrated repeatedly, the very specificity of the human example makes it hard for people to generalize from it.⁷ What’s more, when considering the plight of an individual, the human mind exaggerates the protagonist’s

agency, focuses on individual choices, and blames outcomes on individual frailties rather than broader factors. In this way, human interest stories reinforce dominant paradigms of individualism and dampen attention to policy issues or other collective actions.

We have worked with social change partners for two decades to move from episodic storytelling to thematic storytelling, resulting in significant impact on advocates’ ability to drive changes in public thinking and public policy. In publishing this Explanation Declaration, we wish to offer up another concept that stands to greatly improve the impact of advocacy narratives on social change. Put simply, many advocacy narratives are missing an ingredient whose absence undermines understanding and derails public engagement. This often-elusive ingredient is explanation.

Explanation radically changes the interpretation and impact of the part of the story commonly known as “plot,” or what sociolinguists call the “complicating action.”⁸ Explanation fulfills the key demand of plot — something happening — not with a tale of someone else’s personal triumph or tragedy but with a story that involves all of us, and demands something of all of us. The events of an explanatory narrative immerse us

in the story of how social conditions were created or ask us to imagine how collective action may bend the narrative arc of the future.

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Explanatory techniques often work best in the middle of a narrative, after the entities have been introduced and before the conclusion of the tale. In social change narratives, explanation occupies the critical space between the “why” of orienting values and the “what” of proposed solutions; it provides the “how” that links the two.

Narratives that unpack the mechanisms and processes that constrain and promote social justice are narratives that build power for people. We can use narrative to our advantage only if we remodel it to afford us the opportunity to explain the dynamics at work on an issue.

Explanation is missing in media and advocacy stories

One reason that the public is often unable to call to mind the mechanisms or processes that drive socio-political phenomena is that they get so little practice doing it. We see a lack of explanation in public discourse on social problems — whether the storytellers are journalists or activists — and believe that its absence has atrophied people’s engagement with the important but complex issues of our time.

Since its inception, FrameWorks has investigated the effects of media stories on people’s understanding of social problems. With roughly 40 media content analyses under our belt, we concur with many scholars’ findings: mainstream media coverage overwhelmingly attributes the cause of social problems to individuals and their choices and places responsibility for resolution upon those same individuals.⁹ Our particular analytical approach allows us to contribute insight into how storytelling practices manufacture this outcome. We find a glaring hole in the center of most news

stories: the lack of explanation of the causes, consequences, and remediations of social problems.

Two recent studies illustrate the point. When FrameWorks researchers reviewed a representative sample of media coverage of oral health, they found that more than 66 percent of stories lacked any statement regarding the cause of oral health problems.¹⁰ On the issue of adolescent development, researchers determined that 87 percent of news stories failed to explain adolescence as a time of cognitive, physical, social, and emotional change. In both cases, the lack of explanation is a missed opportunity to build understanding of the dynamics at work. Instead, the public is left to fill in the explanatory gap with convenient assumptions — that poor personal hygiene and lack of discipline causes oral disease or that adolescents’ behavior is simply inexplicable. Worse still, the stories that are told often reinforce unproductive beliefs, such as the idea that outcomes and solutions are the exclusive responsibility of individuals.

Given this pattern of coverage, it is unsurprising that, when we interview members of the public, people are hard-pressed to explain why some children do better than others, how age discrimination affects older Americans, or why teacher turnover undermines educational outcomes.

It is regrettable that, in order to gain access to mass media, social justice communicators have been urged to copy media narratives — and have accepted the dictate. Typical media narratives emphasize storytelling strategies for entertainment over those required to understand and engage in social justice. They direct too much attention to protagonists and give too little space to “how the world works” explanations.

When we shortchange explanation, we give up a route for civic engagement and social change.

Narrative holes are vulnerabilities. If news or advocacy communications don’t explain the causes of crime, or the causes of climate change, or the causes of poverty, we resort to System 1, which narrows our opinions and ideas. If we think of what these shallow ways

of thinking do to us as citizens over time, we can see what’s at stake; when we shortchange explanation, we give up a route for civic engagement and social change. Perhaps Frank Oppenheimer put it best, in describing his reason for founding the public learning laboratory known as the Exploratorium: We believe that explanation makes

“The whole point is to make it possible for people to believe they can understand the world around them. I think a lot of people have given up trying to comprehend things, and when they give up with the physical world, they give up with the social and political world as well. If we give up trying to understand things, I think we’ll all be sunk.”¹¹

people not only more articulate about social problems and their solutions but also more engaged civic actors. We believe that telling explanatory stories is a democratic art, with democratizing impacts. And, to be frank, we fear that if advocates give up trying to explain things, we’ll all be sunk.

FrameWorks' contribution to explanation in 2019

We have come to believe that explanation is so vital to achieving our organization's mission that we have committed our 20th anniversary year to exploring its practice and impact.

Throughout 2019, we will offer essays, learning opportunities, and fresh evidence to bring explanation more fully into social change communications. In the months ahead, we intend to:

- Collect and publish 20 Great Explanations drawn from framing research, explaining their genesis and how to use them to increase people's understanding;
- Identify and publish 20 Ideas that Need Explanation, identifying concepts that are under-explained;
- Devote our Frames of Mind series in Nonprofit Quarterly to exploring how the mission-driven sector can use explanation to make a difference;
- Debut a new learning module that equips advocates to use explanation strategically in their work;
- Conduct and publish new research on how explanation works and with what effects;
- Devote our annual Page Wilson Lecture on Framing and Social Justice to the role of explanation in advancing justice;
- Create a new section of our website devoted to Explanation (you can find it here).

We hope that this menu of activities lives up to the spirit of FrameWorks' originating document, the Brandeis Open Letter. Drawing on two decades of work, we aim to break new ground in our understanding of framing and how it can be better used to advance justice.

We invite all those with whom we share common cause, and with whom we have worked to reframe the public discourse, to join us in a year of experimentation and learning. We believe the world will be a better place for these collaborative efforts.

The FrameWorks Institute
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About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multi-disciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

Learn more at www.frameworksinstitute.org.