Promoting a Realistic Understanding of Rural America through Simplifying Models

Findings from TalkBack Testing

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SUMMARY

Background

In this project, Cultural Logic set out to identify an explanatory strategy (or "simplifying model") with the potential to help Americans think more accurately and constructively about rural parts of the country, the problems they face, and solutions to those problems. Previous rounds of research conducted by the FrameWorks Institute and its research partners have identified a number of cognitive obstacles to understanding and engagement on rural issues – particularly, but not exclusively, among "metro" Americans, who live in cities, suburbs and exurban areas. While Americans often care deeply about rural areas, their thinking is typically rooted in unrealistic images — of a nostalgic and bucolic utopia, for instance. In this context, many changes promoted by advocates to revitalize rural areas simply don't make sense, and may in fact meet resistance because they seem to threaten the special character of rural places, communities and people. Mere "information" about rural areas, such as demographic, economic or other "surprising facts," simply does not have the power to displace long held stereotypes or move people into more productive patterns of thinking.

Based on experience in other issue areas, the starting premise of this work was that the right explanatory strategy can help average Americans shift to a more accurate and productive perspective on rural America, and that this shift in understanding can also lead to increased engagement and support for solutions.

Approach

Simplifying models are brief, "user-friendly" explanations that help lay people understand an issue in a way that is compatible with expert understandings. Simplifying models often involve analogies with familiar objects or scenarios. (Examples in other issue areas include "the blanket of carbon dioxide" that traps heat in the atmosphere and causes global warming, and the ways in which early experience shape the development of a child's "brain architecture.") They form one key piece in the overall communications strategy that emerges from Strategic Frame Analysis.

The process of developing simplifying models involves iterative stages of analysis and empirical testing, resulting in continuous winnowing and refining of hypotheses. The early goal is to identify a wide variety of conceptual directions, through a review of relevant texts (including those produced by advocates), conversations with experts, and so forth. Cognitive analysis and "TalkBack Testing" then allow the researchers to judge whether particular conceptual models have the potential to enter public discourse and to have positive impacts on thinking. TalkBack Testing involves a variety of techniques, from one-on-one interviews to written questionnaires to "chains" of subjects engaged in an exercise something like the child's game of Telephone. In each case, subjects are presented with a brief explanatory text (roughly 100 words) that focuses on getting people to think about rural America in a new way. Measures of the effectiveness of the simplifying model include subjects' ability to remember, explain, use and repeat the explanatory idea. In other words, the testing is designed to assess whether the model has

the capacity to become an organizing principle for thinking and communicating about rural areas.

Recommendation

We conclude that a very effective way to improve the public's engagement with rural issues is to focus on *systems and structures that are counted on by all Americans, but that have not been adequately developed in rural areas*. To confirm the effectiveness of this explanatory strategy on perceptions of rural issues, we tested roughly twenty candidate models, plus variants, in five major categories (discussed in the body of the report). TalkBack testing established that a discussion with this focus allows Americans to avoid many of the serious pitfalls that usually plague thinking on rural issues, and moves people in other more productive directions. The simplifying explanatory model that was most successful in testing embeds the following core proposition:

> The unequal distribution of the basic systems and services we all depend on is making some (rural) regions of the US significantly less livable and less economically viable.

Or, more schematically:

> Missing systems/services → Unlivable communities → Economic decline

At the level of language and metaphor, testing established that an effective way of conveying the idea of unequal/spotty distribution of basic systems is through the term "Patchwork Effect." This language offers a vivid picture that helps people grasp the idea of unequal distribution as well as potential unity.

The most essential feature of the recommended explanatory strategy is that it focuses on the absence of systems and structures whose importance *every* American can appreciate. (Examples mentioned in TalkBack conversations included transportation and health systems, for instance.) The conceptual starting point is one that treats rural/metro differences as secondary and manageable, rather than primary and fundamental. This approach also has two other important strengths:

- Since it focuses on systems and structures rather than individuals, it offers a "big picture," and suggests solutions related to policy and collective action.
- It is very compatible with the values of Fairness and Interdependence that emerged from other FrameWorks research components. (It is *unfair* that basic systems have been developed in some areas but not others, and the consequences are not confined to rural America.)

The following paragraph illustrates the use of the explanatory model, and was successful in testing:

> Most economists are now worried about what they call the Patchwork Effect. This is a problem that is forcing families and businesses to abandon small towns and rural regions that should be vital parts of the economy. In rural areas, the network of basic services that our prosperity and quality of life depend on has never been developed – from transportation services to health care services, banking services, communication services, and so on. The Patchwork Effect is forcing people to leave towns and large areas that should be vital parts of the economy.

An additional helpful aspect of the paragraph is that it cites the concerns of economists (rather than "merely" rural residents or their advocates), as a way of suggesting that this is a practical, big-picture problem.

In all, this explanatory model moves people towards a realistic sense of rural America, and away from the "mythic" understandings to which they otherwise easily default. TalkBack testing confirmed that the message is easily grasped and repeated, and has a series of positive effects. It helps people avoid a number of serious conceptual traps – such as a focus on people's *choice* to live in rural areas – and leads to a sense that it would be natural and practical to update systems and structures in rural areas to make them more like those Americans elsewhere count on.

INTRODUCTION

This report is part of an ongoing effort to help Americans think more productively about the rural parts of the country, the problems faced by those regions, and solutions to those problems. The research and recommendations presented here build on past rounds of research conducted by FrameWorks Institute research partners, including Cultural Logic, and funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation[1].

More specifically, the work reported on here represents the second phase of simplifying models development (see "Simplifying Rural Issues: Findings from Cognitive Analysis and Phone Interviews, Axel Aubrun and Joseph Grady, Cultural Logic, August 2004). This type of research focuses on one specific component of communication – *explanations* designed to improve people's *conceptual understanding* of an issue. In the broader context of strategic frame analysis, simplifying models represent one of several tracks designed to work together in a communications strategy. Explanatory models help fill in people's conceptual picture of an issue, while other elements of framing move thinking and discourse forward by different and complementary means.

Simplifying models development consists of two phases: First, exploration of the gaps in people's current understanding – as well as other cognitive obstacles standing in the way of learning ; and second, testing of explanatory strategies with the potential to move reasoning in a more accurate and productive direction. The current work has continued the exploratory process begun in the earlier phase, leading to language and a conceptual direction with a demonstrated ability to improve average Americans' reasoning and engagement on rural issues.

The Simplifying Models Approach

Simplifying models are brief explanations that convey the essence of an expert understanding, in a form suitable for highly efficient communication with the broad public. A successful simplifying model has two qualities: (A) It has the capacity to enter public discourse (i.e. it is easily learned, remembered, used, transmitted), and (B) It produces measurable positive effects on reasoning. While reading this report, it will be helpful to keep these and a number of more particular points in mind about the nature of simplifying models and what they are intended to accomplish:

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[1] See "The Agrarian Myth Revisited: Findings from Cognitive Elicitations," Axel Aubrun and Joseph Grady, Cultural Logic, October 2003; "Perceptions & Misperceptions: An Analysis of Qualitative Research Exploring Views of Rural America," Meg Bostrom, Public Knowledge LLC, November 2003; and "Talking Rural Issues: A FrameWorks Message Memo, Susan Nall Bales and Joseph Grady," August 2005.

"Missing Links"

On a topic like "rural America," there are innumerable facts and propositions that it might be useful for the public to understand. One critical job involved in the process is determining, through both analysis and testing, which pieces of knowledge do the most to promote better understanding.

Cultural Compatibility

Explanations typically cannot be remembered, used or repeated in the form that experts provide – expert explanations are notoriously complex and jargon-filled, and inevitably make assumptions about what people already understand. Simplifying models research focuses on ensuring that a model is in a form that is compatible with how people actually think and communicate with each other.

"Parallel Track" Approach

Simplifying models are not conceived as stand-alone messages. Instead, they are critical *components* that provide a conceptual organizing principle. They work in tandem with other elements of an effective communication – such as proper framing in terms of "level-one values" identified in other phases of research, including elicitations and focus groups.

Concrete Images

It is a general cognitive principle that *objects* make good anchors for thinking – providing people with a new object to think about (such as the "blanket of carbon dioxide" in the case of global warming, or "brain architecture" in the case of early childhood development) is a helpful way to introduce new understanding.

Concrete analogies and metaphors frequently make effective simplifying models – but if language is too obviously metaphorical, it can be ignored in favor of the "more basic" point, or can be uncomfortable for expert communicators.

Causality

Because simplifying models are ultimately intended to support changes in policy, they need to imply something about cause and effect. If uninsured individuals are "missing pillars" in the healthcare system, for instance – they are not participating in the overall financial structure that supports the system – then uninsurance is destabilizing, and the problem must be addressed.

New and interesting

In order to overcome people's strong tendency to interpret new information as a mere restatement of some already-familiar idea, it is important to find explanatory tools that seem clearly to be expressing something new (as well as relevant).

Big picture

> One of the key goals of most simplifying models projects, including this one, is to help people see a "bigger picture" that transcends individual perspectives and concerns. For example, being a rural person should not be reduced to a simple choice about whether to stay in a rural area or migrate to the city.

In the next section we discuss the methods used to arrive at a simplifying model with these properties.

METHODS

The process of simplifying models development involves iterative stages of analysis and empirical testing, resulting in continuous winnowing and refinement of hypotheses, as we describe in this section.

The assessment of a model's effectiveness begins with qualitative testing (see the discussion of "TalkBack" below), but within the larger FrameWorks approach, models are ultimately subjected to quantitative testing in survey research, to confirm their ability to support and extend values and other frame elements.

Generating Directions

The initial stages of the project involved an effort to identify a wide variety of potential avenues for analysis and testing. These ideas were generated through discussions with experts and advocates in the field, review of materials produced by these experts and advocates, and discussion with colleagues (i.e. the FrameWorks Institute and other research partners). This stage of simplifying models development resulted in a long list of potential explanatory directions that were later evaluated and/or tested with members of the public. (See "Conceptual Approaches" for a discussion of the "families" of conceptual directions included in the research.)

TalkBack Testing

TalkBack Testing is an approach that includes a number of different specific techniques, all aimed at assessing candidate models on two basic criteria:

> Do they have the potential to enter public discourse?
>
> Do they have positive impacts on thinking?

In either formal or conversational settings, subjects are presented with "candidate" simplifying models, and then their subsequent understandings and ability to express them are evaluated in a variety of ways. For example, some measures relate to whether "Metro Americans" understand that they have a stake in how well rural areas are doing; in other cases assessment examined the likelihood that people would repeat a particular metaphor that was presented to them.

Subjects

In all, more than 350 subjects from around the US participated in this phase of the project (in addition to the fifty who were contacted during Phase 1). This group was diverse in terms of occupation, education level, ethnicity, age, gender, geography and political orientation. Over 150 people took part in one-on-one phone conversations. Another 75 subjects were asked to respond to open-ended questions on a written questionnaire. Roughly 120 participated in "TalkBack chains," described below.

Stimulus

Whether in phone interviews, street intercepts, or classroom questionnaires, the material for TalkBack testing consisted of very short texts (roughly 100 words) about some topic related to rural America, e.g.,

> Economists now agree that the most effective step we can take to prevent American small towns from collapsing further is by doing what experts call *Updating*. Without changing the characteristics that Americans appreciate most about small towns, there are ways of keeping them viable by updating the basic services that Americans elsewhere take for granted - from transportation systems to healthcare systems, banking systems, communications systems, and so on. Small Town Updating can help keep large regions economically healthy rather than stagnating, and can also help preserve aspects of America we don't want to lose.

Each text was organized around a particular explanatory model (in this case small-town "Updating").

Following exposure to the paragraphs, subjects were asked to respond in various ways. Sometimes they answered policy-relevant questions such as the following:

- If we don't succeed at small town updating, how would that affect the country as a whole?
- What kinds of long-term effects would these changes in policy produce?

In oral contexts, subjects were also asked to repeat as much as they could remember about the paragraphs they heard. Subjects' ability to remember and express a simplifying model are among the key criteria of its effectiveness. Others include:

- Subjects' ability to use the model in ordinary conversation, drawing new inferences beyond what they have specifically been told
- Their tendency to "stay on track," rather than digressing to other topics
- Most obviously, their tendency to engage in productive thinking about the topic, and to avoid common counterproductive patterns.

TalkBack Chains

The most distinctive technique of TalkBack testing is "TalkBack Chains," which resemble the child's game of "Telephone" (or "Gossip," in some parts of the country).

This approach aims at assessing the capacity of a model to enter public discourse, and the likely ways it will be distorted over time. In the TalkBack Chain methodology, subjects are presented with a paragraph as described above, and asked simply to pass the information along to other subjects as faithfully as possible. After they have explained the information the "teachers" exit and new "students" are brought in and the chain continues, for up to eight or nine "generations."

Initial presentation → 1st generation TalkBack → 2nd generation TalkBack → 3rd generation TalkBack→ 4th generation TalkBack → …

Researchers provide no input after the initial presentation. Subjects are not allowed to take notes, so any information that is passed along must be remembered and internalized, at least enough so that it can be explained during the brief "training" session. Note that each generation usually includes a pair of subjects working together, to reduce the chances that a chain will fail due to a single individual who for idiosyncratic reasons does not do a good job of absorbing the information.

TalkBack chains represent a surprisingly difficult test for any candidate message. As each generation of subjects is exposed to the material, participants have strong tendencies to distort the information (typically in the direction of previously familiar ideas), and to introduce unwanted elements, or simply to forget what they have heard. The chains provide a severe test of the clarity and durability of an explanatory message. By assessing subjects' acceptance of and facility with different models – as they try to explain and reason about the issue – we can make predictions about how effectively particular messages will be absorbed and used once they are disseminated to the public.

The strongest explanatory models show some ability to self-correct – i.e., subjects can end up arriving back at something close to the original formulation, even if they themselves heard a somewhat distorted version.

SITUATION ANALYSIS: MYTH VS. REALITY

In several previous reports, the FrameWorks research collaborative has explored the obstacles that prevent average Americans from thinking about rural issues in productive ways. The core of these findings is summarized here. (Note that while people who live in rural areas are obviously more knowledgeable and realistic overall about the rural situation, they are still subject to the *patterns of reasoning* described here, which are constantly reinforced in popular culture.)

An Invisible Place

Content analyses of news coverage conducted by the Center for the Media and Public Affairs found that there is very little content whatsoever about rural America in the news. Stories about rural matters are rare, and even when rural America is mentioned, issues there are rarely explored in a substantive way. Given the power of the news to shape people's understandings of the world, this near absence of coverage is, in itself, an important reason for the lack of progress on rural issues. Even more insidiously, the cognitive "vacuum" created by news silence is filled by a set of very problematic patterns of thinking.

Rural Utopia

Even though people typically know better (on some level), their thinking about rural America is often guided by a set of stereotyped images that have been shaped and reinforced by everything from nursery rhymes to the morning newspaper. In these familiar and comfortable images, rural areas consist of bucolic landscapes populated by simple, hardworking people who can do without modern luxuries and conveniences, and whose self-sufficiency is a virtue seldom encountered in more modern, metro areas. This is the basic nature of rural areas, even though they may be increasingly threatened by suburban sprawl and other forces. The following dimensions of the Rural Utopia model present particular problems for anyone hoping to bring about meaningful change. (Note that the less common but pernicious Rural Dystopia model – in which rural America is filled with backward people living ramshackle lives – includes versions of the same problems.)

A Different Breed of People

Americans, including rural residents themselves, often talk (and think) as though rural people were different in fundamental ways from "the rest of us" – with different values, needs and priorities, even on the level of day-to-day living. Problematically, this perspective implies that they do not need the same kinds of systems, structures and services that are counted on to support the quality of life that we take for granted in metro areas of the country.

A Different Life

In the Rural Utopia model, life in rural America is fundamentally different from life elsewhere. It is not only slower-paced but fundamentally simpler, healthier and more virtuous. An important consequence is that the idea of rural America is fundamentally incompatible with the idea of modern services and systems (of the kind advocates would like to introduce or improve), or complex economic forces. In one sense, there is a trade-off, or zero-sum relation, between the "luxuries" of metro areas and the virtues of rural life.

A Separate Reality

Even when people know better, they often talk about rural America as though it were a separate space unconnected to more urban areas of the country – as though events and situations in rural areas have no effect on life in metro areas, and vice versa. Naturally, this "causal disconnect" suggests that problems in rural America are of only indirect interest (at best) to "the rest of us."

A Place Out of Time

Although they certainly know better, Americans often talk about rural America as though it were not subject to historical forces in the same way as the rest of the country – as though its essential nature is to remain unchanged, as a reminder of how things "used to be" (even if it is threatened by "modernizing" forces from the outside). Focus group discussions confirmed that this perspective works against the idea of change and improvement in rural life – the thought of introducing modern elements there conflicts with whatever sentimental images people hold of rural life, and of the American Past. In short, change is perceived as threat in the rural context.

The Rural Choice

One of the most basic and damaging assumptions about rural life (encountered regularly in both elicitations and focus groups) is that people have *chosen* to live that way, because or despite of all the differences from metro life. Living in rural areas involves giving up opportunities of the material wealth and comfort that we associate with the American Dream, in exchange for a kind of spiritual and physical health. Naturally this perspective has consequences for people's willingness to "help" those who have made the choice. In fact, even otherwise sympathetic people will criticize efforts to change rural areas as an attack on people's freedom to choose a more isolated, primitive and virtuous lifestyle.

Taken together, these (default, even unconscious) understandings of rural America make up a view that is more mythic than realistic. Americans know on some level that we all need groceries, healthcare, transportation and communications technology of some kind or other, that we all watch movies and shop for clothes. But the comfortable and familiar images are powerful defaults nonetheless. Perhaps most destructively, the topic of rural

life is one where people do not seek out new information, since the satisfying mythic images create the sense they know all they need to know.

A fundamental challenge of the project, therefore, was to find an effective way of shifting people from "Mythic mode" to "Realistic mode" as they think about rural America, while at the same time keeping them interested and engaged on the topic. An effective simplifying model on this topic should be able to accomplish many or all of the following:

- Portray rural people/lives/problems as more similar to "our own"
- Provide a big-picture take on rural problems
- Shift the "blame" for rural problems from individuals to contexts
- Establish the relevance of rural problems for other areas of the country
- Suggest that there are practical steps available to improve the situation
- Discourage the perspective that if life is hard in certain parts of the country, people can "just move/leave"

The "Good News" – Compelling Ideas

In addition to the various challenges and cautions emerging from previous research, two very promising communications directions had already been established before this phase of the project began. The "priming survey" conducted by the FrameWorks Institute between the first and second phases of simplifying models development established that the value of Fairness and the concept of Interconnectedness are effective means for approaching new and more productive approaches to rural America. If Americans feel that people in one part of the country are treated fundamentally differently from those elsewhere, this is a motivation for change in the rural context. And if they understand that the fates of Americans in rural and metro areas are linked, they are all the more likely to support the kinds of policies promoted by advocates. As a result, the simplifying models project was partly guided by the goal of enhancing these perspectives on the rural situation, through an explanation that supports and reinforces them.

CONCEPTUAL DIRECTIONS AND HOW THEY FARED

People do not change their understandings of rural America simply because they are offered new information – myths are not abandoned easily. The simplifying models research explored two distinct approaches to shifting people's reasoning in more productive directions.

The first involved a focus on the unique conditions of rural America, using explanatory models to help people engage with aspects of rural reality that are not part of Americans' current awareness. The tested models in this "family" of explanations took rural America as their starting point, and were clearly "all about" life in those parts of the country.

The second approach downplayed the distinction between rural and metro parts of the country and focused in some sense on American life more broadly.

RURAL FOCUS	*Problems unique to rural America*
	Unique value of rural America
	Accurate overall image of rural America
BROAD FOCUS	*Rural as a part of a larger whole*
	Disconnection between rural and metro
	Rural as "exceptions" to national patterns

Each of the two approaches is discussed at length in this section, along with evidence regarding their relative effectiveness.

Approach 1: "Rural Focus"

The explanatory approach that is most obviously compatible with advocates' current strategies and perspectives involves an explicit focus on conditions and situations that are unique to rural America. During the simplifying models development process, considerable effort was put into exploring this approach – both because it is the one advocates are likely to find most comfortable and because of its directness and conceptual clarity. Explaining the rural situation directly would seem like the most likely way of improving understandings of rural America. Within this approach there were three general directions tested (and several models within each of these categories):

- A focus on preserving the unique *value* of rural America
- A focus on the unique *problems* of rural America
- Attempts to directly replace stereotyped images of rural life with *more accurate images.*

Ultimately, however, this family of models proved unsuccessful. When the focus is on unique aspects of rural life – whether in the context of TalkBack testing, focus groups, or a priming survey – thinking is quickly derailed by the various powerful and counterproductive patterns associated with current, mythic understandings. To the extent they focused on the rural condition per se, the tested simplifying models were unable to overcome these patterns.

Direction A: The Unique Value of Rural America

Due to the emotional charge of people's associations with rural America, it was important to consider explanatory directions with the capacity to tap into this well of feeling and motivation[2]. This approach might, for example, focus on explaining the reasons for the "sad decline" of rural communities. In principle, the new information should help people think in more productive ways, while familiar rural images would provide the emotional driving force for engagement.

Because advocates are primarily interested in improving conditions in rural *communities* – as opposed to promoting no-use policies in wilderness areas, or reducing agricultural run-off into streams, for instance – an effective model would have to explain the relationship between rural communities and the special rural qualities that Americans value. The tested models, therefore, focused on the idea that rural communities act as Stewards of rural America:

> Rural communities should be strengthened because they serve a stewardship function, protecting the rural areas around them – e.g. from environmental, aesthetic and other forms of degradation.

The following are examples of paragraphs based on this Stewardship concept:

> Economists now agree that the only way to preserve rural America as we know it is through what they call the *Root System Effect*. Rural life is eroding on both an economic and environmental level, and the best protection against this erosion is viable, rooted communities. The breakdown of rural America as we know it will continue unless the communities of people that live there remain in place to provide stability. By making sure that rural communities have the basic services and infrastructures they need, we can reverse the erosion of rural America.

> Economists now agree that the only way to preserve rural America as we know it is by nurturing what they call the *Social Root System*. As too many people are forced to uproot from rural areas, rural life is eroding economically,

[2] Another reason to explore this direction is that it is the instinctive favorite of many advocates, who believe that Americans' positive sentiments towards rural America represent a powerful asset just waiting to be effectively leveraged.

environmentally and in terms of quality of life. The best protection against this erosion is viable, stable communities. By making sure that rural communities have the basic services and infrastructures they need, we can enable communities of people to remain in place as the stabilizing Social Root System. A healthy, vigorous Social Root System will halt and even reverse the erosion of rural America.

Economic and environmental experts now agree that one of the most important things about farmers is that they are what the experts call *Landscape Stewards*. Rural areas provide many important public benefits we all count on, from clean bodies of water, to habitat for wildlife such as birds, to a landscape that's enjoyable to walk through. Farmers help maintain these landscape benefits, but in order for farmers and their families to stay in rural areas and act as stewards, these regions also need all the same support structures and services Americans count on everywhere, from good transportation to communications systems to financial services and health services.

The first two of these paragraphs use the metaphor of the soil-stabilizing effects of plant root systems to convey the role of rural communities in preserving the qualities of rural America. The third focuses on preservation of the rural landscape per se, and all it symbolizes.

Unfortunately, TalkBack testing gave us no reason to believe we can "have our cake and eat it too" by tapping into rural sentiment as a motivator to drive people to a more realistic view. Discussions based on rural America's special value fell into many of the familiar traps:

- People feel that the loss of the traditional character of rural life is inevitable.

"Root System" discussion

Q: And what should we do about the problems in rural America?

A: It's been happening for decades, this erosion of the rural landscape. And this problem has been going on for a long time and I don't know whether it's almost gone to such an extent that it's almost past crisis to where we just have to accept – we sort of throw up our hands, there is nothing we can do. But accept the fact that we're not going back.

Liberal, age 48, Massachusetts

- Rural people are "them," with their own problems unrelated to "ours."

"Root System" discussion

Q: And why is it important to preserve rural areas?

A: I guess it is important for those who live in rural areas. Because it's their life. It's what they know.

Q: And what should we do about the problems in rural America?

A: Wow. I don't know.

Liberal, age 27, Massachusetts

- Alternatively, their problems are understood in symbolic rather than realistic terms:

"Root System" discussion

I think it is [worth preserving rural areas] because people who live in rural areas lead a simpler life and have something different to offer. Their life is quite often simple, they sometimes live on a farm, or it just seems like they, the people that live in rural communities are more family-oriented as opposed to success-oriented. They sort of live in an older time. It's like the Amish.

Q: How do the problems that are currently facing rural America affect people living in cities and suburbs?

A: I think they do. I think that because those are the people who truly are committed to families, if that breaks down I'm afraid that everywhere else will break down too.

Conservative, age 41, New Hampshire

"Social Root System" discussion

Small town folks are a lot more honest and forthcoming than city people. City people are a little more, I don't want to say deceiving, but "street smarts" that's a term that gets used quite often. . . . I guess the immediate impact [of the erosion of rural areas] would be a loss of identity of where the country started from. And I guess a lot of America would be lost. Either lost or changed or something. There's definitely something about rural America that cries out. This is what American culture is based upon.

Liberal, age 29, California

Direction B: Specific Rural Problems

Another direction explored in the research focused on explanation of some of the fundamental problems in rural America that make life difficult there. In Cultural Logic's analysis of elicitations with a range of Americans, we discussed the (sadly uncommon) "Rural Systems" mode of thinking, which includes an understanding of the various economic, social and other structures that actually shape contemporary rural life. Focus group research confirmed that explanations of systems and causal forces have the potential to shift people into a more reasonable and accurate mode of thinking about rural

issues. Several of the tested models, therefore, aimed at evoking and informing the Systems perspective by giving people new conceptual tools related to specifically rural problems. The following paragraphs illustrate the approach:

> Economists now agree that the problems in rural areas come from what they call the *Broken Connections Effect*. Americans who live in areas where the population is spread out need the same services and structures as everyone else. But because people and places in rural areas are so dispersed, this calls for extra effort. The most important improvements are what experts call Building Connections – that is, connecting people with the kinds of services and opportunities that we take for granted in cities and suburbs: better transportation, helping someone who wants a business loan find the right lender, and making sure there are doctors located nearby.

> Economists now say that the one of the main economic problems facing the country is what they call the *Collapsing Pillars Problem* – the collapse of the traditional economic pillars in the vast areas outside American cities and suburbs. The consolidation of farming into larger corporate operations that employ fewer people, plus the reduction in US manufacturing means that fewer and fewer people are employed in what used to be the economic pillars of rural regions. Whole communities and regions are no longer viable. The resulting economic dead zones are creating drags on our overall economy, as well as hurting the quality of life for the millions who live in non-metro areas.

Each of these paragraphs focuses tightly on problems that are unique to rural America. The first offers a concrete way of thinking about how the distances between people in rural areas create difficulty in their lives. The second uses the metaphor of collapsing pillars to convey the economic impacts of the demise of traditional rural industries.

Unfortunately, like other directions that take rural life itself as a starting point, this one fails to steer people in productive new directions.

For instance, this approach invites the "Choice" argument – people have chosen to live in rural areas because of the differences from metro America.

> "Broken Connections" discussion
>
> > *Most people who live in the rural areas choose that way of life. And that's my opinion on it. People choose where they live because that's what they want. I don't see that as an issue or a problem.*
> >
> > Conservative, age 46, Texas

"Broken Connections" discussion

> *Leave the people out in the country alone. They live there because they want to live there. They want to be away from all the noise and the chaos in the city. They make the choice to live there. If they need something they can come into town and get it.*
>
> *Conservative, age 25, Texas*

Direction C: Accurate Portrait

A third direction involved directly replacing the stereotyped image of rural life with a new image. People are easily able to conjure an image of what rural America is supposedly like, and it would be helpful if they had easy access to a different picture that is just as clear and "user-friendly" while also more accurate.

> Many Americans conjure up an unrealistic set of pictures when they think of rural America, but a more accurate picture is this: Americans in rural areas share the same range of needs, interests, tastes and abilities as Americans anywhere else, but find themselves in a very *Different Situation*. They do not have any healthcare facilities within a reasonable distance. They have little access to the convenience of public transportation. They are interested in getting information via the Web but are less likely to have access to it. And they have less access to investment capital when they want to start businesses. In short, they require the same public investments that benefit American communities everywhere.
>
> Rural America has been changing, and economists have coined a term, *New Ruralism*, to describe it. In New Ruralism, whole regions have gone from being economically depressed to being vigorous and vibrant parts of the national economy. In places where New Ruralism has taken hold, people are living fully modern lives in the countryside, with access to the internet, to modern health care, and to all of the services and opportunities that Americans take for granted. New Ruralism hasn't taken off everywhere, however. In too many rural areas, the old ways have fallen apart and communities have gone into decline. These areas need enough public investment and outreach to have the kind of modern infrastructure that allows the New Ruralism to get going.

Unfortunately, this conceptual direction was no more successful than any of the others that reinforced the uniqueness of rural America. For instance, it invites people to continue to see rural America as a separate world where people live by separate rules:

"Different Situation" discussion

Q: And what do you think can be done to improve the situation in rural America?

A: Help people have skills so that they can become self-sustainable out there. They don't have to depend on anybody. There's ways that if they choose to live in rural America, that they have skills to either have a garden or know how to fix up their home. Maybe they can know their neighbors and their car pool or they have to get to town.

Conservative, age 27, Oklahoma

"Different Situation" discussion

Q: What can be done to improve the situation in rural America do you think?

A: That's a good question. I don't know if anything can be done. . . . But I think it's sort of like a give and take. Because they do get to be around the trees and away from all the pollution. So it's kind of like a give and take, you know what I mean. They have things that we might want. They have land. We don't have land. You look out your window and you can see your neighbor's bedroom window. Things like that.

Liberal, age 27, Massachusetts

Furthermore, candidate models in this category provoked resistance to the idea that rural America might have changed. Put simply, people don't necessarily accept that rural America has already changed, and have little interest in "modernizing" it. These perspectives were encountered often in elicitations and focus group research, and simplifying models in this category were unable to change the pattern.

"New Ruralism" discussion

You talked about rural America and changing that to this new vitalization where they become fully Americanized or modernized. I don't quite frankly know if that's such a great thing. Honestly. As long as people want it, it's fine. I'm not sure that always having kids sitting in front of TV's and the Internet is the best thing, the best way to go.

Conservative, age 57, Maryland

"New Ruralism" discussion

Granted it's important that rural areas have access to things. But, I mean I like seeing countryside and not seeing gas stations every mile and shopping centers.

Conservative, age 24, Delaware

"New Ruralism" discussion

There's just this homogenization of the nation going on. I think there's something dirty and sacrilegious about turning the country into like the

suburbs. Turning the country into the city. There's something false about it. If you want to live in the country live in the country. If you're going to live in a rural area, be rural. The people who live there a lot of them are people who have done farm work or they do factory based work. All that good stuff and that is really important as a foundation I think still for what's going on in this country as well as the world.

Liberal, age 32, Maryland

In the end, all the tested models in the "Rural Focus" category allowed subjects to continue to see rural America as a "world apart." The models led people into the familiar traps – particularly the idea that it's "*their* problem" (vs. *our* problem) and the idea that "they chose that life."

Ultimately, we conclude that a more effective communications approach is an organizing idea that makes it harder, rather than easier, to focus on what is special and distinctive about rural America.

Approach 2: Broader Focus (Backgrounding the Rural Difference)

In effect, all the models that emphasized the special nature of rural life ended up reinforcing the default perception of rural America as a "world apart" – practically a different dimension, causally separated from metro America. This separateness is deeply problematic for reasons already discussed, and none of the tested models that focused on explaining rural America *per se* were able to override it – if anything, they may have inadvertently reinforced it.

Therefore, simplifying models development also focused on explanations that background the rural difference, and might in principle apply to other parts of the country, such as struggling urban neighborhoods.

In particular, there were three directions tested (with several models in each category):

- Rural areas as critical *parts* of national systems/structures
- The problems when rural and metro areas become *disconnected*
- Rural areas as *exceptions* to national patterns

Direction D: Rural areas as parts of the whole

Another logical explanatory direction – which is closely related to the compelling idea of Interconnectedness that emerged from other FrameWorks testing – is to focus on ways in which the nation as a whole depends in practical ways on the contributions (e.g. economic) from rural regions.

> Economists say that America's economy is not firing on all cylinders, and they are concerned about what they call *Rural Power Loss*. The urban and international segments of the economy are pushing forward, but the rural economy has lost its power. Rural communities have strong, motivated workforces, but too many communities have been left idle by changes in agriculture and industry. This wasted energy adds up to Rural Power Loss. Rural America is a great, untapped resource that can add horsepower to the economy once we get jobs and investment back into rural areas.

Unfortunately, it proved difficult to persuade subjects that rural difficulties really affect metro regions, too. Conversations tended to focus solely on problems in rural areas themselves, and to devolve to the familiar, unproductive patterns.

> "Rural Power Loss" discussion
>
> *Q: How do you think this problem is hurting the economy?*
>
> *A: ... Well, obviously there is a domino effect. These are people who are in need of support from the government as opposed to being self-sustaining and it's creating a mess. It's just not helping to stabilize the price of food in our country and it's just a domino effect that's not creating a positive outcome. I think it's hurting the economy definitely.*
>
> *...*
>
> *Q: Would you support efforts to revive the rural economy?*
>
> *A: Whatever is necessary. I know that these individuals would like to be productive again. Whatever is necessary, as long as in the long run they can be self-sufficient.*
>
> Liberal, age 30, Wisconsin

Direction E: Disconnection between Rural and Metro

This category of models focuses on negative consequences when rural and metro areas become more disconnected – e.g., when businesses close in rural areas, the economic flow between metro and rural regions is reduced.

This was the thrust of the Tourniquet Effect direction that emerged from the earlier phase of simplifying models development as one deserving further testing:

> Experts feel that large areas of America are suffering from what they call the "Tourniquet Effect." Less populated counties and smaller towns are being cut off from the rest of the country, as factory jobs and small farms disappear. When the economic ties that link these regions to the rest of the country are choked off, the

> normal flow of money, people, and services that keep these vital regions alive is interrupted. This Tourniquet Effect is turning healthy areas into unhealthy ones.

Unfortunately, the model proved to have little effect in the priming survey, possibly because the Disconnection direction requires people to learn more than one new idea, and to take several logical steps: It demands that people understand the importance of connection between regions, and also that they understand how these connections are being "cut." In the end, the additional analysis and testing in this subsequent phase of simplifying models development uncovered other, more productive directions, and in particular the next one we will discuss.

Direction F: Rural areas as exceptions

The conceptual direction that performed best in testing treated rural areas as exceptions to general American patterns. These models focused on aspects of American society that are universally understood and even taken for granted, rather than taking the rural difference as the organizing principle for the discussion. Because this direction fared the best and yielded our ultimate recommendations, we devote the next section to it.

RECOMMENDATION

TalkBack testing demonstrated that a focus on the *basic systems* that all Americans count on (communications, health care, etc.) ultimately helped people engage more productively and realistically with problems in rural areas. When people are given a tool that helps them grasp the *unequal distribution* of these systems in some areas vs. others, their thinking follows lines that lead to support for the kinds of changes recommended by advocates.

Core Proposition of the Model

The core proposition of the successful explanations was the following:

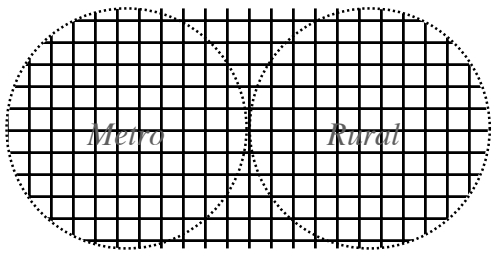
> The unequal distribution of the basic systems and services all Americans depend on is making some (rural) regions of the US significantly less livable, and less economically viable.

Or, more schematically:

> Missing systems/services → Unlivable communities → Economic decline

The most essential feature of this explanatory strategy is that it focuses on systems and structures whose importance *every* American can appreciate, such as transportation and health systems. It allows metro Americans to identify with rural Americans in ways they often don't, and the conceptual starting point is one that treats rural/metro differences as secondary and manageable, rather than primary and fundamental.

One way to understand the effect of the model is to see the idea of systems we're all used to as an "overlay" that backgrounds the distinctions and separations between metro and rural that usually get in the way of productive thinking:



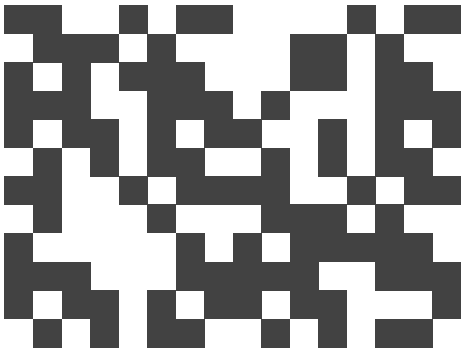
America

This approach also has two other important strengths:

- Since it focuses on systems and structures rather than individuals, it offers a "big picture," and suggests solutions related to policy and collective action.
- It is very compatible with the values of Fairness and Interdependence. (It is *unfair* that basic systems have been developed in some areas but not others, and the consequences are not confined to rural America.) The survey research conducted by the FrameWorks Institute for the "Talking Rural Issues" Project demonstrated that both Fairness and Interdependence are powerful values cues for promoting understanding and support of rural issues. The model aligns itself with these cues and helps make them more concrete.

Language and imagery

At the level of language and imagery, testing established that an effective way of conveying the idea of unequal/spotty distribution of basic systems is through the term "Patchwork Effect." This language offers a vivid picture that helps people grasp the idea of unequal distribution as well as potential unity.



Many other ways of expressing the same point were considered, and several were included in testing.

Disjointed	Patchy
Fragmented	Piecemeal
Hodgepodge	Scattered
Makeshift	Scattershot
Missing	Spotty

The term Patchwork proved to be memorable and effective. Importantly, there was *no suggestion in the research that the term Patchwork evoked homely images* of rural

sewing circles etc. On the contrary, in the context of the TalkBack discussions, there were indications that the term was taken as intended:

Sixth "generation" discussion of Patchwork Effect

S1[3]*:* *Economists are concerned that there is a problem in rural areas called the Checkerboard Effect. I'm not quite sure why they named it that. Maybe because they're missing some of the services, kind of a hit and miss thing with their mail and transportation that are lacking in those areas. So much so that the rural area people are moving into the city and they fear that this going to have a negative effect on our society and on the economy.*

Q: *OK, Beverly did you want to add anything or correct anything?*

S2: *Actually it was called the Patchwork Effect.*

S1: *Patchwork. What did I say?*

S2: *Checkerboard. … And I had a feeling they called it that as a reference to quilts. That there seems to be gaps in services in rural areas. And they are worried that that's going to affect population in those areas negatively.*

Eighth "generation" discussion of Patchwork Effect

Economists are concerned with something they call the Patchwork Effect. In rural areas essential services are not consistently available. Presumably there is a patchwork of availability of these essential services. And this is encouraging folks to move out of rural areas and into cities.

Selection of Examples

In order to convey the idea of missing services and structures, it is necessary to offer examples. Any number of examples might be presented, from health care systems to Internet communications to public transit to social services. Three considerations drove the choice of examples used in testing:

- Breadth: It was important to suggest that this is a general problem, by citing a wide variety of structures that are missing or inadequate in rural areas.
- Clarity: Subjects had to easily and quickly understand the references in order for them to be effective.
- Universality: It was essential that the services and structures be recognizable as ones all metro Americans would hope and expect to find in their communities.

[3] The labels "S1" and "S2" refer to different subjects within the same TalkBack conversation.

Example paragraph

The following paragraph illustrates the use of the explanatory model, and was successful in testing:

> Most economists are now worried about what they call the Patchwork Effect. This is a problem that is forcing families and businesses to abandon small towns and rural regions that should be vital parts of the economy. In rural areas, the network of basic services that our prosperity and quality of life depend on has never been developed – from transportation services to health care services, banking services, communication services, and so on. The Patchwork Effect is forcing people to leave towns and large areas that should be vital parts of the economy.

This paragraph should only be taken as an illustration of use of the model, and we do not anticipate that communicators will ever repeat it in its entirety. This text is designed not only to convey the essential idea of the model in a clear and memorable way, but also to deal with the unusual context of TalkBack testing. TalkBack participants are deliberately presented with a paragraph with no discussion beforehand, in order to determine the effectiveness of a single idea. In any "real" situation, communicators will have the opportunity to add context, choose their own examples, and express the model in words that suit their own context and preferred style.

That said, it is worth reviewing the paragraph in order to clarify what each part is adding to the message.

Most economists are now worried about what they call the Patchwork Effect.	Economists' concern signals practical, big-picture problem New term, introduced at top of communication, signals this is a new concept to pay attention to Concrete image to convey unequal distribution
This is a problem that is forcing families and businesses to abandon small towns and rural regions that should be vital parts of the economy.	Concrete image of "forcing" people out conveys one important impact of the problem Mention of "small towns" signals this is not about bucolic countryside Emphasis on rural areas as parts of a whole
In rural areas, the network of basic services that our prosperity and quality of life depend on has never been	Introduction of the key idea – unequal distribution of services we all rely on Examples chosen for breadth, clarity,

developed – from transportation services to health care services, banking services, communication services, and so on.	universality
The Patchwork Effect is forcing people to leave towns and large areas that should be vital parts of the economy.	Repetition of term and impacts beyond rural areas

TalkBack testing confirmed that the message as a whole has a number of the hoped-for effects, which we discuss next.

Impacts of the Patchwork direction

Avoiding Traps

Several of the striking and impressive effects of the Patchwork message are negative in kind: The sorts of unfortunate reasoning described earlier in the report *don't appear* as people talk about the Patchwork Effect. The Patchwork message seems to help people avoid the powerful stereotyped perspectives, and to stay in Realistic rather than Mythic mode as they think about rural America.

One particular trap the model avoids is the Rural Choice perspective. Subjects discussing the Patchwork Effect *virtually never referred to the idea that people "choose" the rural life*. Presumably this is because a strong focus on what all communities need simply makes it less natural to think about choosing between one area and another.

Another important trap that the Patchwork Effect model successfully avoids is that it does not lead people to lose their focus on rural America. In both elicitations and TalkBack testing of other messages, discussions of areas that remain undeveloped in particular ways often became conversations about struggling urban areas. Conversations about the Patchwork Effect, though, consistently stayed focused on rural issues.

It is important to note that this conceptual direction avoids many traps even though it uses the term "rural." Early versions of the paragraph avoided the word "rural" altogether, instead using formulations like "smaller towns," "less populated areas" and "outside of metro areas." This reluctance to use the term "rural" stemmed from repeated experiences where counterproductive patterns were easily triggered. But the Patchwork Effect message showed no sign of triggering these default patterns. Even though TalkBack participants routinely translated our indirect references into the term "rural," they did not fall into the various conceptual traps associated with that term.

In addition to the "negative evidence" of avoiding traps, the TalkBack conversations about the Patchwork Effect showed various positive signs of more productive thinking.

Minimizing the distinction between rural and metro

The model encourages people to talk about systems and the big picture, rather than the experiences of individuals. Yet, when people do start to think about individuals, they talk as though rural and metro people are comparable.

Q: So what can we do about this problem [of the Patchwork Effect]?

S1: I know a lot of people who have moved to Vermont, or moved to Vermont maybe twenty years ago and started with cottage industries but now a lot of people do graphic design and high tech stuff at home. I don't know how much communities themselves would be able to do or even local governments. . . .

S2: I guess another possibility and probably this is already being tried in many cases is if incentives were provided for people like college graduates or even physicians, artists, musicians, this kind of thing. If there were incentives provided for them to go to the more rural areas. Instead of joining the crowds in the places that are already packed to the gills.

Two moderates, age 40 from Ohio and age 36 from Pennsylvania

They also talk as though rural and metro life are comparable (and just as importantly, *should* be).

Big-picture Solutions

Another positive and important effect is that people connect the Patchwork problem to policy in a productive way. It was clear to TalkBack participants that government and/or business should play a role in addressing this problem – e.g. through investments in infrastructure as well as job creation.

Q: What can we do?

A: I think probably legislation to coordinate the funding of special infrastructure and what not. Efforts to provide some federal funding for areas that have a particular need. Public funding and working in conjunction with charities and that sort of thing. I think the municipalities in metropolitan areas can coordinate their efforts between themselves and the rural areas you know, it might benefit those areas as well.

Liberal, age 44, North Carolina

S1: Government has to include everybody not only the big cities. They have to include people who live all over and give them services.

S2: Right, but it's not just the government that's doing it. Part of the job of planners and landscape architects and economists is to develop and to help

businesses start off that can sustain economic changes. The point is to develop Mom and Pop stores so that it's a higher wage, and therefore it helps the community in general. And part of the development has to be subsidized while the small businesses are taking off.

Two liberals, age 63 from Florida and age 35 from New Mexico

Realistic Engagement

In addition to the very important effects described above, an explanatory message about rural America should keep people from simply dismissing the topic as unimportant or irrelevant to them. While the TalkBack method does not involve quantitative measures, the testing strongly suggested that people who hear about the Patchwork Effect are more engaged than people hearing other kinds of messages.

Q: What do you think we should do about this problem?

A: I think that state and local government should help putting in the infrastructure in health and transportation and those things. They should give more emphasis on these areas. It's more of a government function, because people cannot do much about these things.

Liberal, age 60, Maryland

In sum, the Patchwork Effect message seems harder than others to reject as "their problem," it helps people avoid Mythic mode, and encourages consideration of realistic solutions

Memorability

One of the standout qualities of the Patchwork Effect message proved to the memorability of the term itself. While the simplifying models approach is ultimately about providing people with *conceptual* tools, people's ability to remember a particular term is also important for several reasons. First, we are hoping to introduce a new idea into discourse – an idea that will have to be expressed in language (and ideally through images as well). More subtly, if people are able to remember and repeat a term, as well as explaining it accurately, this is a good indication that their thinking has remained focused on the right topics. Here is a portion of a fifth generation discussion of the message. The individual remembers the term and does a reasonable job of capturing its gist.

Economists are concerned about something called the Patchwork Effect. And the patchwork effect concerns rural areas – they don't receive mail delivery and much transportation. They're not receiving services so economists are concerned about people leaving rural areas and the negative effect it's going to have on the economy.

Female, age 26, Maryland

Evidence like this strongly suggests that the term and the concept at the heart of the message are clear enough to last and have an impact on people's reasoning.

CONCLUSION

By itself, an explanatory model like the Patchwork Effect is not a silver bullet for reframing rural issues. As they try to bring about new kinds of change in America's stance towards rural regions, communicators also need to pay attention to other aspects of framing emerging from the research conducted by FrameWorks on how Americans think and respond in this issue area, including Values and Stories. Advocates must carefully consider everything from what issues they highlight to who delivers their message most effectively to how to frame new issues that arise.

What the model does offer is a conceptual anchor and organizing principle compatible with other FrameWorks recommendations that can further help communicators stay on a more productive track as they talk about rural issues. If the Patchwork Effect model is introduced very early in a communication (rather than as an afterthought), it helps move listeners and readers towards a Realistic mode of considering rural issues, and reminds them that the problems under discussion are practical, big picture issues that should be of concern to all of us. As a conceptual starting point, the model can also help communicators make decisions about questions like those mentioned above. For instance:

- Issues that should be highlighted include services and systems that are missing or inadequate in rural areas.
- As new issues arise they should be framed in terms of impacts on the viability of communities, rather than on the plight of individuals.

Rural advocates are struggling against patterns with long histories and deep roots in the American mind. But when communications are effective, they can help people shift into modes of thinking that feel as clear and natural as they are new.