

MORE THAN WORDS

How communicating our shared values
and forging mutual connections can
bring hope for a new tomorrow

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Foreword

'...the relative freedom which we enjoy depends of public opinion. The law is no protection. Governments make laws, but whether they are carried out, and how the police behave, depends on the general temper in the country.' George Orwell, *Freedom of the Press* 1948

Recent years have witnessed growing recognition among philanthropy and civil society of the influence of public opinion on social change, and in turn on the role of narrative and messaging in helping to shape it. There has been a proliferation of strategic communications initiatives in the UK in recent years, spanning diverse issue areas such as poverty, climate change, homelessness, criminal justice, health and children in care. Supporting strategic communications through grantmaking, the Thomas Paine Initiative, which I lead and which will be wound down this year, has since 2012 supported UK initiatives that are designed to further Eleanor Roosevelt's ambition that human rights have meaning 'in the small places close to home.'

'Narrative change', 'framing' and 'strategic communications' have firmly entered the lexicon of donors and social change agents in the UK, Europe and internationally. To date, however, the sharing of learning and insight between these initiatives has been ad hoc, while opportunities for collaboration are largely unexplored.

To begin to fill this gap, this crucial new report by Alice Sachrajda and Lena Baumgartner draws together learning from the field, explores the interconnected nature of attitudes to the issues we care about and sets out challenges and areas for future development.

It is vital that those involved in such work begin to work more closely together to build our collective skills and capacity. Collaboration is essential if we are to push back the tide of populism, nationalism and social division that obstructs what we collectively want to achieve in the world. Together we need to keep building and nurturing the values of openness, tolerance and universalism, without which our individual efforts will be in vain.

I hope that this report and the Learning Exchange that it has been written to inform will act as a catalyst for such sharing and collaboration in the months and years ahead.

Neil Crowther
Director, Thomas Paine Initiative
April 2019

Executive Summary

Introduction

We are living in an age of fast-paced, instant, mass communication. The messages we share have the potential to ripple out further than ever before. Our ability to connect with large audiences and appeal to huge swathes of people has changed beyond recognition in recent years. Opportunities to mobilise movements of people is influencing the way we communicate the issues we care about. Researchers, activists and campaigners are embracing different disciplines such as cognitive psychology, behavioural science and linguistics to consider how best to reach out to audiences and appeal to hearts and minds.

The growth in the area of strategic communications¹ is simultaneously burgeoning with potential and bewildering with possibility. This is exciting and challenging in equal measures: funders are trying to determine how to invest in this space; communications specialists are experimenting with how to get their messages heard; and charities are left wondering how to best engage with the rapidly developing area of strategic communications.

Voluntary sector² organisations play a significant role in shaping public debates. Their communication feeds into the public discourse, which gets picked up by the media and can influence political decision-making. In this way, voluntary sector organisations can set the tone and parameters for political action, policies and behaviours. Voluntary sector organisations have tended to communicate in a technocratic, directive way. But recent years have heralded wider and more volatile forces, which are shaping public agendas. This is forcing organisations to re-think their approach to strategic communications, which has led to a greater focus on audience research and targeted communications.

Nowadays with the advent of social media and opportunities to reach out to large numbers of people, there is a pressing need to appeal to the collective public imagination. Our communications needs to adapt and respond strategically to this opportunity. This means we need to think more about how to enthuse and inspire with our communications in creative ways that build momentum for our campaigns.

Innovation in communications offers an opportunity for change in the sector at a time when it faces a plethora of challenges relating to public mistrust, political uncertainty, rising inequality and social disadvantage. And while questions remain about how to build up robust evidence, spread best practice, ensure cross-sector learning and join up existing communications initiatives, we recognise there is much potential and good practice.

1. The term 'strategic communications' has gained prominence in the voluntary sector in recent years. Our use of the term in this report describes purposeful communication – i.e. communication that sets out to achieve a particular objective. This report draws on examples from a range of sectors that employ strategic communications (such as marketing, advertising and the commercial sector) to illustrate how it can encompass a range of styles and approaches, including verbal and non-verbal communication.
2. The terms "the sector" and the "voluntary sector" are used interchangeably throughout this report and refer to the entire UK voluntary sector. "Charity communications sector" specifically refers to a sub-set of people and organisations working on communications in the UK voluntary sector.

This research

This research was commissioned by the Thomas Paine Initiative, with support from a group of UK trusts and foundations (including Barrow Cadbury Trust, the JMG Foundation, the Oak Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, Rosa, the UK Fund for Women and Girls, and Unbound Philanthropy) as a scoping study in advance of a Learning Exchange to take place in May 2019, bringing the strategic communications field together to facilitate cross-sector learning and to explore the appetite and feasibility for collaboration around commonly-held values. Our brief was to carry out scoping work to understand more about the strategic communications field in the UK as well as to explore the potential for joint working across sectors, particularly where there are commonly-held values.

This paper explores how voluntary sector organisations in the UK are developing, embedding and sharing their communications strategies. It provides an overview of where the field currently is, and poses questions and provocations. We encourage charities to embrace strategic communication as “gifting” and reflect on the significance of non-verbal communication. We highlight examples from the voluntary sector and the commercial world. We then look at the barriers holding the sector back and how, and with what backbone support, this work could flourish. Finally, we address how greater collaboration could move the sector forward.

Findings

Part One, More than words, explores how we approach communications: it focuses on the stage before we open our mouths, or put words on a page. We explore the value of deep listening, priming, authenticity and positivity. We describe this relational approach as “gifting” our communications. We reflect on the importance of an authentic approach to communications, which strengthens our shared values. We are enthused by the prospect of this approach leading to a more collaborative and connected future.

Part Two outlines what emerging best practice on strategic communications in the UK looks like. Leading practitioners, funders and charities have driven the growth in the field and we share examples and relevant research. We have divided emerging best practice into four themes, which we identified as key during the course of our interviews and wider research. These address how we can communicate effectively by leading with shared values (i.e. by incorporating more of what we share into our communications); who are the messengers best placed to communicate (to ensure credibility and authenticity); what needs to be the central focus of our communications (i.e. ensuring that our communications get to the crux of structural and systemic challenges); and where we take our audience (by offering them a positive, future-facing and solutions focused vision). For each theme we identify promising initiatives from the voluntary sector, as well as other industries.

Part Three looks across the current state of charity sector communications, identifies the main challenges holding the sector back and sets out how it could move forward with strengthened backbone support. We reflect on the challenges and opportunities for change across four main areas: collaboration and leadership; the culture of the charity communications sector; current levels of investment; and the supply side of existing levels of expertise. Some of the barriers relate to the voluntary sector, others could be addressed through investment. While we acknowledge the barriers, interviewees had a wealth of suggestions about how they could be overcome.

Part Four, Collaboration for Change, draws together our conclusions and summarises questions for discussion. We conclude that strategic communications can play more of a role in helping the sector to collectively strengthen shared values. While the provision of additional backbone support is vital for the development of the field, a focus on agency and collaboration is even more so. We see much potential for the voluntary sector to form connections, build and share evidence and to collectively move the field in the same direction. This effort needs to focus on shared values, common goals and a joint positive vision of the future. Initiatives like the Learning Exchange planned for May 2019 are an important starting point, and we conclude the report with a set of questions to shape the next stage of thinking, discussion and development.

Methodology

Our research is based on 14 semi-structured interviews with practitioners, researchers and funders, in addition to a series of over a dozen informal, unstructured interviews. Our findings also draw on a review of recent research outputs and resources on framing. Our interviewees took part anonymously to allow for frank reflections and we thank them for their time and input.

There are limitations to our research and we were working to a limited budget. While we have endeavoured to bring in insight from as many people as possible, we were restricted by the time available and the breadth of the fields we have sought to include. We recognise that there are many more examples of good practice, and sector examples that we could have included, with more time to do so. Nevertheless, we hope our findings and questions will help to stimulate discussion across issue areas.

We pose questions at the end of each section of this report. We view this report as a springboard for more work to support the voluntary sector to communicate better and more effectively. And we hope it will help funders to consider how they can play a role in enhancing the development of this field of strategic communications. We welcome the opportunity to develop this work further and we recognise that collaboration is needed to make it a success. There is much commonality to build on, and no shortage of ideas that could move the sector forward.



1. More than words

Imagine for a moment that you have walked into a party. You look around and see people mingling with one another, some chatting, others deep in conversation. Suddenly someone appears at the corner of the room, puts a megaphone up to their mouth and begins to project their views and opinions into the room. Then, someone from another corner takes up with another megaphone, then a third, then a fourth and so on. It becomes difficult to decipher the different voices being projected and they are all trying to get your attention in different ways. Each holder of the megaphone is speaking about a different issue, in a different way. The first is forcefully projecting a vociferous, righteous message. The second is judgmental and critical, evoking shame and guilt. The third is whining and pleading, urging you to pay attention. The fourth is recounting a story about someone else. And the fifth is a melancholy lament, listing a litany of problems and challenges in ever more complex detail.

Needless to say, you can imagine the immediate disapprobation that would follow. How dare these people assume we want to hear their views? How presumptive to project their views on us all! How can we think for ourselves when they are telling us what to believe? And, quite apart from what they are all saying, how is their tone and mode of communication making us feel? Not to mention the cacophony that ensues. You might begin to think: How can I concentrate on everything all at once? Why are you assuming I want to listen to you? In fact, you would be forgiven for looking around you and wondering to yourself, how can we put a stop to this infernal cacophony of noise?

Now imagine a different situation. This time you walk into a party with people chatting and mingling just as before. Several people approach you. They greet you warmly with sincerity and kindness. They ask about you and they listen to what you have to say. They offer to connect you with some of their contacts, and in turn you offer to introduce them to your network. They tell you a joke, which you find amusing, and you share an anecdote that sets you all laughing. One of them regales you with their exciting aspirations for the future, which align with your own vision. They give you concrete ideas of how you could work together to achieve your shared goals. Others are drawn to the group's shared warmth and positive energy and you feel an unspoken, intangible connection with the people around you.

Leaving aside the content of what is said, and the messages you take away from the two imaginary parties, the difference lies in the way they make you feel. Where the first party would make you confused and overwhelmed, the second would leave you feeling enthused and upbeat. Where the first would give you a feeling of detachment and being projected at, the second would inspire connection, and unearth a strong sense of shared purpose with the people around you. The chances are you would walk away from the people with the megaphone at the first party, whereas the people at the second party, who have gifted you with



their thoughtfulness, ability to listen, offers of connections and hopeful vision will have gained your trust and become part of your network.

Strategic communication in the voluntary sector can feel like attending the first party, but has the potential to be like the second. The voluntary sector abounds with creativity, innovation, passion, inspirational ideas and good intentions. But we have a tendency to project our messages, to shout about our causes and to communicate in a way that makes others feel overwhelmed, targeted, guilty and tangled up in deciphering the problems, rather than motivated towards enacting pragmatic solutions. Our greatest assets are the resilience, kindness, compassion and openheartedness of the people who work within the sector. These are gifts that can be cultivated and enhanced, creating movements connected by shared purpose. This section explores how we communicate before we open our mouths, or before our words even hit the page.

How can we make our communications more relational and gifting? And how can we make it less like it is being directed through a megaphone?³

How much have we listened to ensure we understand the complexity and multiplicity of different viewpoints and emotions?

How are we making our audience feel?

Is our relationship with our audience based on trust and respect? And is leading with our issue front and centre always the best approach?

1.1 Deep listening: Understand and learn from our audience

Our research indicated that there is a crucial trust-building stage preceding verbal or written communication. Several of our interviewees stressed that deep listening means you are less likely to project your argument in a righteous, strident, combative manner. Instead, it allows you to reflect on where you can find common ground with your audience. It may be more powerful to seek out connection on intangible, shared values, rather than to set out to explicitly change someone's mind. But you can only do that effectively by being prepared to listen to others and respect their opinion and viewpoint.

"We have to build up a connection with our audience. It's not that people don't care, but we need to have more of an audience-centred approach. Often we talk but we don't listen. We need to do more deep listening."

Interviewee

"People who do communications work on a regular basis need to go

3. This megaphone/gift analogy was inspired by an article in the Stanford Social Innovation Review: https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_science_of_what_makes_people_care



out and meet the people they are communicating with. Research that involves people who communicate and campaign needs to start with people setting out to meet, understand and learn from their audience.”

Interviewee

By listening more closely to our audience the objective of strategic communications can become less about fighting to change minds, and more about exploring common connection. An approach that begins with listening is more likely to achieve this objective and will respect and honour the storytellers themselves. The US organisation Wonder advocates for this with their ‘Heartwired’ approach. Their research methodology focuses less on trying to convince someone why they are wrong and more on understanding their audiences on a deep level, exploring how issues align with identity, values and lived experiences. They refer to this approach as creating change ‘from the inside-out rather than the outside-in’.⁴

Some of our interviewees referred to audience research and segmentation as tools to help us understand more about the saliency of a particular issue among the general public. This work helps us to become attuned to public attitudinal trends, and the research is valuable to get an indication about what people think, and how those thoughts have changed over time. It is also better than basing views about audiences on speculation or anecdotal evidence. Some of our interviewees raised the important point, however, that this tells us what people think about a particular issue, but it doesn’t always tell us how to communicate with the audience as a result. Some of our interviewees noted that using the segmentation research as the communication itself risks being perceived as antagonistic:

“I think there are pitfalls with the audience segmentation route. It distances people into characters, which can be reductive and not entirely true.”

Interviewee

“When we talk about migration we refer internally to the ‘anxious middle’ but that terminology has filtered out into the public – of course that’s going to upset people! The natural response to that is: “I’m not anxious.”

Interviewee

What these interviewees address is that a segmentation analysis can provide us with important information about how people think differently about a particular issue. But it does not necessarily mean that it is the best strategy to directly communicate these findings. While we may think differently on particular issue areas, there is reason to believe that many of us feel connected by similar sorts of values to one another. We would approach a communication strategy very differently if it was based

4. [Heartwired: Human behavior, strategic opinion research and the audacious pursuit of social change](#)



on how the vast majority of people feel connected by the same sets of values, which could be helpful for strengthening a public-facing discussion framed around a united, collective position.

Danish company TV2's advert, 'All that we share'⁵ which went viral with millions of views is a powerful example of strategic communication, which reflected more on our commonalities than our differences. The advert states: "maybe there's more that brings us together than we think" – Interestingly, the Daily Mail reported favourably on the video, describing it as 'thought-provoking' and recognising that it had 'struck a chord' with viewers around the world.⁶

How can our communications embody this powerful message, which moves away from putting us in boxes and instead acknowledge that the vast majority of us share common values of respect and kindness?

What is the primary objective for communicating our message?

How can we connect with and listen to our audience in order to build relationships and find shared ground?

How can we ensure that we listen to the complexity of people's thoughts and feelings?

And how can we ensure that public attitudes research is communicated in a way that unearths where there are shared connections?

1.2 Priming and pre-suasion: The role of visual and non-verbal communication

The voluntary sector often seeks to persuade people via verbal and written communication, with the hope that a well-crafted message will 'win over' or sway the audience. But there are many types of communication: verbal, non-verbal/interpersonal, written and visual, and the style, tone and timing can influence the message enormously. Visual communication is particularly powerful because of the way it makes you feel. Adverts designed to make you feel pity or shame may trigger a response, but these sorts of communication often achieve a short-term, emotional reaction and can backfire when an organisation is looking to build longer-term strategic change in attitudes and beliefs. Some voluntary sector organisations are exploring ways to incorporate visuals and music in a way that promotes empathy and connection, see for example Equally Ours and Age UK's video which leads with a message around compassionate care.⁷

Focusing unduly on words overlooks the importance of connecting with the audience – through the tone, visuals and intangible association, which is immediately formed prior to the message being relayed. It also fails to account for how we engage with content based on the emotional connection it provokes and how it makes us feel. Academic research in the areas of 'pre-suasion', 'nudging' and 'priming' are worthy of reflection. Take for example the fact that holding a warm object briefly, such as a cup of hot coffee, before meeting someone new is likely to make you feel

5. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jD8tjhVO1Tc>

6. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4186088/Thought-provoking-advert-Danish-TV-channel-goes-viral>

7. See: <https://www.equallyours.org.uk/strategic-communications/his-name-is-charles/>



warmer and more trusting towards that new person.⁸ Or that nodding your head up and down while you are listening to someone speak means you are more likely to agree with them⁹. Or that seeing an image of an open door will make you more open and amenable to the message that is subsequently relayed.¹⁰ We like to think of ourselves as beings that can rationally compute information but delve into our human psychology and a very different picture emerges.¹¹

Cultural content and creative outputs play a tremendous role in shaping popular opinion and galvanising social movements. We can learn from the commercial, marketing and advertising industries who understand how powerful non-verbal communication, 'pre-suasion' and priming really are. In addition to asking our interviewees to reflect on strategic communications within the voluntary sector, we also asked them to share examples of effective or successful communication from other sectors. Many referred to advertisements, successful marketing campaigns and big collective events, such as the Olympics and Paralympic Games. What these have in common is a tendency to focus on connection, feelings and to inspire their audience through powerful visuals.

"Ad agencies don't focus on fear or insecurity, they focus on love. Advertising and marketing are built on that. But the charity sector feels guilty about using it."

Interviewee

The private and commercial sector is attuned to the need to emotionally connect with its audience. Take for example the viral John Lewis Christmas adverts, rarely featuring any product placement at the outset, these adverts are accompanied by soundtracks such as 'The Power of Love'¹² and evoke feelings of connection, home and family before the viewer is provoked to contemplate a potential purchase.

"It was important for me that the advert was close to my actual memories and experience so it had that emotional impact. And yes, the piano has always been a big part of my life. My earliest memories always revolve around music and the piano was always at the centre of family life when I was growing up."

Elton John, with reference to the 2018 advert

Naturally there is a cynical side to this, in the commercial sector we are primed or 'pre-suaded' to be receptive so we buy an item or behave in a particular way. But, the voluntary sector can learn from an approach to communications that forms a positive, empowering connection, such as Channel 4's approach to promoting the Paralympic games or Ben & Jerry's campaigns (see boxes), rather than a directional approach setting out to target or persuade.

8. R. Cialdini, Pre-suasion: A revolutionary way to influence and persuade, p.108

9. http://www.communicationcache.com/uploads/1/0/8/8/10887248/overt_head_movements_and_persuasion-a-self-validation_analysis.pdf

10. <https://www.thersa.org/discover/videos/event-videos/2016/12/robert-cialdini-on-the-power-of-persuasion>

11. There are some seminal works which make valuable contributions, such as: Nudge: Improving decisions about health, wealth and happiness by Thaler and Sunstein; Thinking Fast and Slow by Daniel Kahnemann; The Righteous

12. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2012/nov/09/john-lewis-power-of-love>



Channel 4 and the Paralympic Games

Channel 4 made a conscious decision to throw all its creative weight behind the Paralympic Games and in raising the profile of the achievements of disabled athletes. The images were striking and empowering ('Meet the Superhumans'), the language was collective and in some cases tongue in cheek ('Thanks for the warm up' as the Olympics drew to a close) and much of the coverage was fronted and owned by people with a disability (such as The Last Leg which started out as commentary but has continued as a longer running programme). The language was about as far away from a pitying narrative as you could possibly get and instead created an air of excitement and anticipation. The campaign has been credited with changing the way people feel about disability and is now being studied as part of the curriculum in UK schools.

Sources: <https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/story-behind-channel-4-changed-minds-disability/1450209> and <https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/campaign-year-channel-4/1164081>

Ben & Jerry's collaboration with the International Rescue Committee

This joint campaign aimed to centre communication around the notion of home: 'it's time to come together for people in need of a safe place to call home'. The language is collective ('Together for Refugees' and 'we've teamed up with the IRC, and are urging our fans') and offers the opportunity to be part of a key moment in time ('This historic piece of legislation is about to be debated ... join thousands of others in emailing your representatives now by filling in the form') as well as leaving the recipient feeling positive and engaged ('which will make you happy too').

Source: <https://www.benjerry.co.uk/flavours/home-sweet-honeycomb-ice-cream>

1.3 Authenticity at the heart: communicate positively and live out our values

Authenticity is paramount in communications. This is important to engender trust, and to avoid being discredited. Positive, feel-good content is powerful, but it needs to be well judged, and culturally appropriate to have emotional resonance. The Kendall Jenner Pepsi advert¹³ is a commercial example, which lacked authenticity and received a huge public backlash. It was heavily criticised for jumping on the bandwagon of a social issue (in this case Black Lives Matter and Resistance movements) to gain currency, but was deemed 'tone-deaf', tokenistic and insincere.

13. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/pepsi-advert-pulled-kendall-jenner-protest-video-cancelled-removed-a7668986.html>



Conversely, the Heineken 'Worlds Apart'¹⁴ and Gillette 'Best a man can be'¹⁵ adverts were praised for their progressive messages on feminism, climate change, trans rights and promoting positive masculinity. These approaches have weathered a heavy dose of criticism, being accused of 'virtues-signaling' by outspoken commentators¹⁶. We can view them cynically; their overall intention is to sell more products and increase their profits and they have done that by courting controversy. But their approach is still worthy of reflection. It is positive, assured and forward-looking. They are capitalising on a sea change in public opinion on these topics and are 'going with the grain' which builds trust with their audience. They have 'gifted' their communication by creating something that people enjoy watching, feel an affinity with the content and choose to share more widely. This means the companies can hold their ground with an authentic belief in the stance they are sharing so publicly. This puts the incensed critics on the back foot, forcing them to rebut and reject through their megaphones, which may even increase the profile and resonance of the original message.

The voluntary sector can learn from these examples. Credibility, positivity and a strong handle on shared values are paramount in voluntary sector external communications. This is particularly the case if the voluntary sector wants to collaborate with corporates to share these sorts of messages in the future.

Communicating authentically means more than producing a well thought through external communications campaign. It also means that people with lived experience of an issue need to be at the heart of organisations advocating on their behalf (and ideally in positions of leadership within the organisation). Strong buy-in at all levels of the organisation, effective leadership, investment and a commitment to embed and live out a values-driven approach builds credibility, which is significant alongside carefully crafted external communications.

How can voluntary sector senior leaders demonstrate a more open, collaborative and supportive communications approach both internally as well as externally?

How can major organisations working on distinct social issues partner up and support one another's work where there are similar values that sit beneath the work?

How can current funding models do more to encourage collaborative communication, rather than competition, which encourages organisations to shout the loudest about their issue?

1.4 Gift our communications: the benefits of a relational approach

Focusing our communication far less on issues and much more on underpinning values is a radical notion. In fact, in a recent conversation one of the authors had, this was described as "heresy for the voluntary sector". Voluntary sector activists are tenacious, focused and driven. Their passion and drive is what leads to advances in policy on specific

14. https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2017/04/27/heineken-worlds-apart-ad_n_16301068.html

15. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=koPmuEyP3aQ>

16. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/15/gillette-metoo-ad-on-toxic-masculinity-cuts-deep-with-mens-rights-activists>, <https://www.marketingweek.com/2019/01/18/gillette-brand-takes-hit-as-metoo-ad-backfires/>



issue areas. We commend their drive to push forward urgent reform on issues that matter and we acknowledge that this has led to policy advances on a range of social issues. But we also recognise that the voluntary sector could do more to explore how it could work more closely together to achieve shared aims. Communicating our shared values could have greater collective impact in the longer term.

Academic research tells us that: “issues that gain attention also gain presumed importance.”¹⁷ There is an important question here for polling companies and organisations that seek to research the saliency of issues deemed toxic or challenging in the public eye. Could it be that every time an organisation asks people their views on the scale of immigration, for example, that it heightens anxiety about the issue itself? Would it mean that a report that tells us how polarised we are actually has the effect of heightening a feeling of detachment and dislocation in our society?

Perhaps to create a profound shift in the way our society views migration, for example, there may be more value in strengthening the importance of shared notions such as: hospitality, safety, care, love, kindness, family, friendship, sharing, reciprocity, hope, welcome, openness, generosity, trust and pride, rather than relying on repeatedly hitting home facts, and indeed stories, about migrants. And, as the Common Cause research, No Cause is an Island¹⁸, demonstrates, by strengthening a set of intrinsic, self-transcendent values we can ‘shift the dial’ across a whole range of other issues too. This means that by strengthening shared values you can simultaneously shift how someone feels about homelessness, poverty, migration, the environment, disability, mental health etc.

An interesting example of a collaboration from the 1980s, arising out of different issues but shared values, is the ‘Lesbian and Gays Support the Miners’ (LGSM) campaign¹⁹. The LGSM group recognised that the miners were being ostracised and marginalised in much the same way that they were and set out to offer their allegiance. The group raised thousands of pounds and rallied public support for the miners. An interesting outcome was that the LSGM campaign, perhaps inadvertently, proved to be an important turning point in the progression of their own issue as it garnered greater support and recognition for LGBT groups in the UK.

The questions below may be radical, but we deem them important and worthy of discussion and further research if we are going to achieve a more relational and collective approach to strategic communications in the future. Part Two, below, elaborates on where there is work underway within the sector to take us in this direction: leading with shared values, bring appropriate messengers into a position of leadership, articulate specific calls to action and set out a more positive path to where we want to be in the future.

Are there opportunities to show solidarity and support for completely different issues where there are underpinning shared values?

How can we work together to ‘tip’ movements into the mainstream?

17. R. Cialdini, Pre-suasion: A revolutionary way to influence and persuade, p.48

18. <https://valuesandframes.org/no-cause-is-an-island>

19. <http://lgsm.org/>



What is the role of research in articulating where there are shared positive aspirations and goals among society at large?

How can we share stories about how open hearted, generous and welcoming we are as a nation? And, in so doing, would it serve as a reminder that people hold these values dearly from across the political spectrum, and that these values can operate as a weather vane for political and policy change?

Do funders who only fund on specific issue areas encourage us to shout the loudest?

Would funding aimed at strengthening values lead to more longer term success?

Would funding to encourage organisations working on different issues to work together on amplifying and strengthening shared values be feasible in the longer term?



2. Emerging best practice

Over the past decade a group of trusts and foundations have proactively built and funded a communications infrastructure in the UK. This is in response to growing understanding of the importance of strategic communications as a necessary tool to achieve change. There is a huge amount of 'behind the scenes' work which goes into establishing and nurturing the field. Many of our interviewees commented on the value of a group of dedicated and supportive funders who have worked together to identify where strategic communications work needs to be invested in and nurtured. There are undoubtedly challenges to this, and Part 3, below, elaborates on these.

This research has not been extensive enough to be able to give due recognition to the many positive examples of voluntary sector communications, which exist across a range of issue areas. We are aware of the limitations here and by no means present the examples referred to here as a definitive summary. Our intention is to highlight and reflect on a selection of initiatives, funder collaborations and influential players who are leading with best practice on strategic communications within the voluntary sector. These were mentioned and referred to by our interviewees, and help to illustrate the four areas where we feel advances have been made in strategic communications in recent years, namely: leading with values; fronting communications with credible messengers; framing the system; and creating a positive, future-facing vision.

2.1 Lead with shared values: strengthen shared values to support multiple causes

Our shared values form intangible points of connection. We can do our best to articulate our values in words, but ultimately they are deep feelings that act like a strong magnetic force for every one of us. We are drawn towards the values that resonate with our intuitive personal beliefs and feelings.

Jonathan Haidt, the influential academic and author of *The Righteous Mind*, describes how the first principle of moral psychology is that: 'intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second' and yet time and again in the voluntary sector we lead our communications with rational, strategic reasoning. Instead, if we lead with shared values, we can create change through the intangible and intuitive feelings we communicate. This means that change begins to take the shape advocated in Chip and Dan Heath's influential book, *Switch: How to change things when change is hard* i.e. that change comes about through a process of: SEE-FEEL-CHANGE, rather than: ANALYZE-THINK-CHANGE.



“Trying to fight inertia and indifference with analytical arguments is like tossing a fire extinguisher to someone who’s drowning. The solution doesn’t match the problem.”

Chip and Dan Heath

The voluntary sector often leads with issues and facts as the primary focus for a message. This is appropriate where the issue is not contentious or relatively low saliency in the public eye. It will also often be the right strategy when communicating with policy decision makers or where there are efforts to ‘referee’ a contentious public debate. But recent interventions in the fields of moral psychology and social science are helping us to understand that issues and facts are not the best strategy for communicating to large audiences, especially where the issue is contentious or particularly salient in the public arena. In these cases, there is growing understanding of the need to approach strategic communications as an opportunity to strengthen pre-existing values as a means to create change, rather than to set out to ‘change minds’ or ‘win over’ the audience.

“General values like love, freedom and hope – there’s scope for more to be done on that and thought about. I’m not sure that a lot of strategic communications work has started with those frames. It tends to be: here’s the set of topics we want to message on.”

Interviewee

“We want people beyond the choir to engage. Questions like: what’s the one thing you can’t live without? That’s something we can all identify with. It appeals to the everyday humanity in all of us. We need to think more about sharing/highlighting the common humanity of us all, rather than putting people into groups.”

Interviewee

This does not mean that strategic communications must abandon research, evidence and facts—these are not two opposing approaches, but can instead be symbiotic. There is absolutely a need for the sector to base its interventions and policy work on robust evidence and facts; but there can be a change in how we communicate them to a larger audience.

In recent years we have seen a growth in framing as a communications approach. The cognitive linguist George Lakoff has produced influential research to demonstrate how important metaphors are for understanding and communicating the world around us and he urges us to consider how owning, rather than negating, a frame can help to bolster a position.²⁰ There are a range of resources available to guide in how to use framing effectively across a whole range of issue areas (see box below on framing practitioners).²¹

20. <https://georgelakoff.com/>

21. See for example, “How do we frame our way out of this mess?” by PIRC: <https://publicinterest.org.uk/narrative-movement-review/> and see the PIRC website for an extensive collection of reports and toolkits on framing



Framing practitioners

Organisations like the Public Interest Research Centre (PIRC), Common Cause, Values Lab and The Frameworks Institute are pioneering a focus on values and frames in their communications. PIRC have an extensive collection of toolkits and reports that provide guidance as to how to frame effectively across a range of issues. Common Cause has produced thoughtful contributions in this space, notably its report 'No Cause is an Island' which sets out to demonstrate how strengthening intrinsic values in relation to one issue area can shift the dial on a whole range of issues. Values Lab describes how: 'by engaging particular values we can inhibit or promote attitudes and behaviours that support our work for social change.' And The Frameworks Institute has carried out extensive research with a number of voluntary sector organisations, in the UK and the US, to provide direction on to how to frame effectively on specific issues.

Sources:

<https://publicinterest.org.uk/>

<https://valuesandframes.org/>

<http://www.values-lab.ie/>

<https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/>

Framing our communications with shared values de-politicises issues and fosters consensus. The marriage equality and Repeal the Eighth campaigns in Ireland are cases in point (see boxes below). Another notable example is the communications response to the Windrush scandal in 2018, which demonstrated how strongly held values with cross-party support could play a central role in successfully halting a harmful government policy.

"Compassion and justice are really powerful – they were also used around the time of Windrush with an injustice frame – I do think they could apply across multiple areas"

Interviewee

"Windrush touched on this – these are British people – the value of fairness came out strongly – it's not very British to treat people in that way. I think the reason it was effective was because there was a cross group emphasis and across parties and because it touched on our values sets."

Interviewee

Marriage Equality and Repeal the Eighth Abortion Campaigns in Ireland

Two recent campaigns in Ireland are noted for an approach that centred on values, and the way people could feel emotionally connected to the campaign. The referendum for marriage equality took place in 2015 and resulted in a resounding yes vote. The referendum to repeal the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution



to legalise abortion took place in May 2018 and passed with a landslide in favour. Both of these campaigns led with values-based communication that centred on kindness, love, friendship and family. The focus moved resolutely away from facts and data and instead focused on stories that appealed to shared values and provoked empathy.

Source: Marriage Equality: Bring Your Family With You and 'In her shoes' campaign

“The intrinsic values of self-direction, benevolence and universalism and what we base our work in. It was successful during the Irish yes campaign – i.e. that Irish people are inclusive, generous and fair – it appeals to benevolence and universalism. It was similar with Repeal the 8th – the focus was on empathy, standing in her shoes, together for yes. Not alienating and divisive, but instead appealing to a shared sense that brings us together; it was more compassionate rather than saying: ‘these people need these rights’.”

Interviewee

Marriage equality in the US

Similar to the Irish example, the successful campaigns around achieving marriage equality in four US states in 2012 (Maine, Minnesota, Washington and Maryland) were built on communications that centred on love, family, tradition and connections. The campaigners had learned from the devastating 2008 result when, at the very time of President Obama first getting elected, Californian voters came out in favour of Proposition 8, a constitutional amendment stripping same-sex couples of the freedom to marry (later found to be unconstitutional). The campaign leading up to the Proposition 8 vote had focused strongly on freedom and equal rights and had failed to connect with voters.

Source: https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/post/marriage-equality-takes-four-steps-forward/2012/11/07/b3ae62ea-2925-11e2-b4e0-346287b7e56c_blog.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.607615eba193

The US and Irish examples raise questions about the efficacy of leading with a ‘rights-based’ approach to communication. Respect for human rights is a central tenet of progressive ideology, and yet this is sometimes portrayed and perceived as some people having their rights held up at the expense of others. These examples illustrate how it may be more effective to lead with a collective, family/friend-oriented message to achieve the same goal.



“Our research into LGBT communications showed that if people feel like it’s a special group in people’s mind, a fringe group with rights, then people start to think: ‘who’s this special group seeking rights at the expense of something else? If we are giving them something then what do we lose?’ Whereas if our values are inclusive – i.e. that reflect the compassionate society we all want to live in – then people don’t get trapped in worries about a minority group.”

Interviewee

Some of our interviewees raised the challenge of communicating using a ‘fairness’ frame. While on the face of it, the notion of fairness may seem incontrovertible, in reality ‘fairness’ can mean different things to different people. A fairness frame was effective in response to the Windrush scandal, but may not necessarily be effective in the case of other migrants. And, with respect to poverty for example, a fairness frame might provoke people to state that ‘it’s not fair that people are not working’ (evoking a sense of people being deserving/un-deserving)²² rather than acknowledging the system locking people into a position of poverty. In the same vein, appeals to ‘freedom’ by human rights campaigners could have traction among conservatives, but those same conservatives equate freedom with sovereignty and are opposed to the idea of supranational institutions such as the European Court of Human Rights. In appealing to some values (particularly in the case of fairness and freedom) we need to be careful not to undermine our cause. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation and The Frameworks Institute have jointly worked on re-framing poverty in the UK. They measure through controlled testing which values shift people’s thinking on a number of different fronts - for instance, the salience of the issue, support for solutions and belief that change is possible. Their research found that leading with shared values such as ‘justice’ and ‘compassion’ can build public will to solve poverty.²³

Our research has provoked us to wonder whether it would be more galvanising to lead with values (and use language and messages) that present an immediate human connection, such as love, kindness, family, community, co-operation, sharing, trust, reciprocity, pride and care, rather than values that embody similar traits but that are framed in a more disassociated, ‘academic-sounding’ (and traditionally progressive) way i.e. equality, dignity, autonomy, liberation, rights, stewardship etc. But our observations on this are tentative and we posit this as an area for further research and discussion.

Communicating efforts to prevent male suicide

An example of an organisation that has shifted its communications to be more values based is the UK mental health charity CALM, the Campaign Against Living Miserably. Faced with figures of suicide being the single biggest killer of men under 45 and 84 men taking their lives every week CALM realised that shouting about the horror of suicide “doesn’t solve a thing.” Instead, driven by a new CEO and board with strong links to the creative industries, CALM shifted towards

22. See George Osborne’s 2015 quote on fairness and benefits here: <https://www.economist.com/britain/2015/07/09/george-osbornes-sad-triumph>

23. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/blog/talking-about-poverty-uk-what-works>



messages around friendship, kindness, positivity, laughter, family and love. Examples of this include their “Be the mate you’d want” campaign with TV channel Dave and their “#GramFam” campaign with The Mix and Instagram, aiming to encourage students to look after their peers, their Instagram family, at particularly stressful times. CALM have found this shift very successful for their awareness raising work, and struggle to meet the demand on their phone and text-line following these recent campaigns.

Sources: <https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/dave-calm-be-mate-you-d-want-uktv-creative/1519596> and <https://www.thecalmzone.net/2018/08/introducing-gramfam/>

A grasp on the effectiveness of shared values gives communications professionals the ability to be able to respond well to challenging arguments, as one of our interviewees noted: “The framing cuts through; it makes the critical perspective look out of date.” The language when we speak about shared values also has a vital role to play. Talking about shared values also means using language like ‘we’ and ‘our’, which fosters a greater sense of togetherness and collective purpose. This type of language contrasts with commonly used approaches to charity communications which focus on ‘othering’ language designed to evoke sadness or pity for ‘them’ but which can fail to emphasise our fundamental commonality.²⁴

“It’s not just about ‘what’s our narrative on migration’ which is incredibly important, but also when we’re given this argument, an insidious argument and knowing what we can say in response. Framing with shared values means you don’t just argue it’s not true – you can keep coming back to shared values.”

Interviewee

But there are challenges in relation to broad values messaging. Sometimes values language can be vague and idealistic. As one interviewee noted: “We want to strengthen those values but expand what people refer to.” Part 2.4 below, reflecting on communication of structural and systemic issues, explores how we can frame the values around what needs to be done and communicate what the call to action/policy asks might be.

Could we do more as a sector to lead our communications with values that inspire human connection?

Which values are most powerful to encourage cross-party political support?

How can we strengthen values but also maintain the nuance of a message?

24. Reframing Homelessness in the United Kingdom: A Frameworks Message Memo



2.2 Credible messengers: authentic messengers in a position of leadership

Strategic communications is not just about what we communicate, it's also about who communicates and how the message is shared. A rational and well-crafted message is unlikely to resonate if it does not come across as a credible and authentic voice on the issue.

On Road Media

On Road Media, is working to improve media coverage of misrepresented groups and issues. It partners with and trains people with lived experience as spokespeople and supports them to work with the media. On Road Media recognises that people with lived experience are authentic and credible messengers and are also best at developing solutions to the issues they have themselves experienced. Best known for its award winning projects 'All about Trans' (promoting the voices of trans people) and 'Angles' (promoting the voices of people who have experienced sexual violence or domestic abuse), On Road Media is increasingly taking a more cross-sectional approach, working with their trained spokespeople with lived experience across all of their projects, and connecting them with each other.

Source: <https://www.onroadmedia.org.uk/about/>

Several of our interviewees referred to the marriage equality campaign in Ireland, noting that friends and families were particularly effective messengers on the issue, something that was also the case in the US campaigns on marriage equality. This, combined with a strong narrative around family love and genuinely supportive sentiments was highly influential in the resulting yes vote during the referendum. Australia then followed suit with a marriage equality campaign in 2017 that was modelled on the Irish approach by asking parents and grandparents to speak about their decision to vote yes on social media.²⁵

“Marriage Equality did that well. Controversially – it wasn’t so much the LGBT activists themselves, but instead it was family messengers telling their stories: mothers, fathers, daughters, and friends, both older and younger. It worked for that issue – it was the way they framed it and the nature of the issue.”

Interviewee

Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s support of the film, A Northern Soul is an example of a funder placing someone with lived experience in a position of leadership with an authentic voice. In Steve Arnott’s words (the main protagonist in the documentary): “Unless we speak about what we’re going through, it goes unheard.”

25. See: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/australian-campaign-for-marriage-equality-follows-irish-model-1.3232036>



The need to be thoughtful in selecting a messenger can extend to looking beyond the obvious, and moving away from the usual activist or beneficiary messengers and considering using messengers that an audience trusts. In some cases well known, trusted figures will have authority that lends weight to a message. In a recent US campaign, policemen and pastors were effective messengers on migration. Similarly, the US campaign around marriage equality in Maine in 2012 used pastors and priests as messengers to convey messages based on family values and tradition, with five of the 11 TV advertisements featuring Christian messengers.

The Royal Foundation: communicating through lived experience

The Royal Foundation is a UK funder that is very purposeful in the use of messengers, due to being in a unique position of having messengers that are able to get an audience and media attention like few others. The Foundation has found their principals to be effective messengers on both mental health and armed forces issues—issues where there is a clear link to personal, lived experience, which gives authenticity and a legitimacy to address an issue. They are mindful not to over-play the messenger's role, however, as this could diminish their credibility.

Source: <https://www.royalfoundation.com/>

There are many organisations who communicate their messages through people with lived experience and through spokespeople networks, too many to name in detail here given that this research is a cross-sector study. Our relatively limited coverage of this area nevertheless leads us to believe that the use of effective messengers is important to consider and warrants further thinking and research.

Who are the most effective people to front our campaigns?

How can people with lived experience be in an empowered position of leadership to message about their cause?

How can we avoid wheeling out the usual suspects or relying on detached, impersonal case studies to communicate our messages?

2.3 Frame the system: highlighting ineffective structures and unfair systems

The voluntary sector is recognising that we need to approach and communicate social problems systemically. This allows us to interrogate the structures that perpetuate societal problems, rather than focusing on change at an individual level. Leading with shared values only gets us so far, we also need to underpin this communication with a more definitive explanation of what needs to change; a system focus allows us to do that effectively.



“The key thing for our communications is who we say is responsible for solving the problems we’ve got. It’s a big framing challenge we’ve inherited from a neo liberal culture: the idea that individuals are responsible for their own successes and failures. Sometimes there’s actually a systemic responsibility, which is top down.”

Interviewee

“The work of systems change involves seeing systemically—looking at the elements, interconnections, and wider purposes of systems—and acting systemically. Story plays a vital role in helping us do both of these things.”

Ella Saltmarshe, Using story to change systems²⁶

Systemic thinking forces us to consider the longer-term picture, rather than fixating on short-term change²⁷. The value of airtime is an important area for reflection. Negative news reporting may generate coverage, but this may not always be a good thing if the focus is for short-term gain.

“I think you’re on the right track with more of a focus around care, trust and love – but what you’re picking up on is how we relate to one another. What we’ve also got to pick up on is resources, processes and priorities too.”

Interviewee

“The sector has a tendency to talk about bad bosses, slum landlords, rather than system. But then it gets into an ‘us and them’ narrative. Divisive language gets airtime but is not good in the long term. This is a really big issue for framing across areas”

Interviewee

NEON (New Economy Organisers Network)

An example of basing strategic communications around the system is NEON in their two-year partnership with Frameworks Institute, PIRC and the New Economics Foundation on “Framing the Economy”. The clear messages coming out of the intensive, collaborative process is that the system—the economy—is a social construct, and that it is broken. However, instead of engaging in fatalistic thinking of the system being too big to change, NEON’s strategy focuses on stressing that the system has been consciously designed, and that we have the power to re-programme it, if we work together. NEON is following this work up with different strands of implementation work, namely a spokesperson network, a press-officer network, toolkits as well as presentations and trainings.

Source: https://neweconomyorganisers.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Framing-the-Economy-_-NEON-NEF-FrameWorks-PIRC-1.pdf

26. See: https://ssir.org/articles/entry/using_story_to_change_systems

27. See this article for reflections on how progressive philanthropy can learn from conservative funders, i.e. to invest in the long term: <https://nonprofitaf.com/2018/12/10-things-progressive-funders-must-learn-from-conservative-ones-or-we-are-all-screwed/>



Adopting a system-focused approach and focusing on solutions and human agency, instead of fatalism are important elements of good strategic communication. Sharing stories that highlight systemic obstacles is a key element of this (more so than facts and data).

“The Windrush coverage shows you don’t need much resource. It revealed the value of IMiX and a good journalist writing up stories. It’s an interesting example from a communications perspective. But it wasn’t joined up enough – we didn’t pivot to be able to say: “Here are our three specific policy asks”. Instead it was, “This is what we’ve been saying for ages, the Home Office is so complicated” but that wasn’t a clear ask, and then the moment disappeared.”

Interviewee

A significant fault line in much NGO communications is the lack of a clear policy ‘ask’, or the failure to offer up a clear call to action. It’s not enough to highlight the problem; we need to articulate what needs to change (i.e. which systemic issues need addressing) and how we are going to get there (i.e. by which actionable route). In some cases it will be a governmental issue requiring political or policy change, in others it will be actionable by the public taking a specific action on a particular issue. One example is the plastic bag levy – a specific policy ask which requires buy-in and action from the public but is proving to be effective in both raising public awareness of environmental issues and achieving significant results in a reduction of plastic waste.²⁸

How can our communications identify where specific changes need to be made and by whom? What is the call to action and how can it appeal intuitively to people?

28. Drop in plastic bags littering British seas linked to introduction of 5p charge, The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/apr/05/drop-in-plastic-bags-littering-british-seas-linked-to-introduction-of-5p-charge>



2.4 Look to the future: communicate a positive, solutions focused vision

In the interests of modelling what we mean by a 'positive future visioning', imagine for a moment we have fast-forwarded 50 years and it is the year 2069. Major changes have taken place to make the voluntary sector deeply connected and collaborative. Organisations are less focussed on shouting about their own issues and instead work together to strengthen and model values of kindness, hospitality, friendship and generosity. The UK prides itself on being a welcoming place and newcomers are recognised for the value and enrichment they provide to our society. Climate change crises have been lessened, largely due to a unified and concerted response from a range of activists beyond the environmental sector. Kinder work practices and lifestyle changes have resulted in a happier, healthier workforce and there are opportunities for people from all backgrounds to play a meaningful, active role in society. Of course, problems still exist – a Utopian ideal is wholly unrealistic – but we have the strategies and means to respond to challenges with hopefulness and compassion. And we are already visioning where we want to be in 50 years from now...

We need to have a hopeful vision for the future if we want to galvanise a movement of people with shared collective purpose. We often dwell on challenges in the hopes that people will sit up and listen, but in reality many of us tune out communications that makes us feel despairing and hopeless. Communication focused on problems appeals to our rational side, rather than our intuitive side and leaves us feeling impotent and helpless about the future.²⁹

There are positive examples of strategic communications focused on pragmatic solutions-focused messaging. The 'Framing the Economy' project has made strides forward in articulating a common agenda and vision. Their focus is more about 'what we are for' rather than 'what we are against' i.e. leading with the idea that "economic progress means enabling everyone to have a good and fulfilled life".³⁰ Voice for Change and Runnymede are taking steps towards this approach and their recent report stressed the need to help advocates convey that: "solutions are available to advance race equality."³¹ FrameWorks Institute advocates for an approach to 'combat fatalism by explaining collective solutions'. They state:

*"Explaining how public-private partnerships work to effectively address homelessness may achieve this goal, but more research is needed to find effective frames for cracking people's sense that nothing can be done. This is one of the most important challenges to address in future work."*³²

"We need to move away from overwhelming people. Homelessness is a massive issue, but if you talk about the scale of the problem then people are overwhelmed, there's nothing they can do about that. If change is possible focused then we can be part of the change."

Interviewee

29. See Thomas Coombes, <https://www.openglobalrights.org/why-the-future-of-human-rights-must-be-hopeful/>

30. NEON, NEF, FrameWorks Institute, PIRC, [Framing the Economy: How to win the case for a better system](#)

31. S Lingayah, O Khan and K McIntosh, [Making the Case for Racial Equality: The potential and limits of framing](#)

32. FrameWorks Institute, [Finding a Better Frame: How to create more effective messages on homelessness in the United Kingdom, A FrameWorks Strategic Report, sponsored by Crisis, 2017](#)



“The biggest challenge with framing is how to build hope and optimism for the future we want to see. We need to put that out in our frames. We spend so much time trying to persuade. But we miss the crucial bit about building hope.”

Interviewee

Several of our interviewees commented on examples where positive future visioning has helped to imagine a point in the future where the world has changed. Notable ones include: *The World We Made*: Alex McKay’s story from 2050 by Jonathon Porritt and Simon Amstell’s *Carnage* – see boxes – as well as the famous “I have a Dream” speech made by Martin Luther King.

The World We Made: Alex McKay’s story by Jonathon Porritt

Our planet’s future is too often described in terms of doom and despair. However, there is another perspective that is not only positive, but credible, too. *The World We Made* describes a planet that is green, fair, connected, and collaborative. Based on extensive research, leading environmentalist Jonathon Porritt reveals how we can achieve a genuinely sustainable world by 2050 if we act immediately. Part history, part narrative, *The World We Made* describes the key events, technological breakthroughs, and lifestyle revolutions that could transform our planet, covering topics as wide-ranging as 3D printing, personal genomics, urban agriculture, and the digital landscape. The book’s innovative ideas are brought to life with futuristic photographs, infographics, and hand-drawn sketches, while an extensive index provides the tools and tips needed to prepare for what’s ahead.

Source: <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/17899465-the-world-we-made>

Carnage: Swallowing the past

Carnage: Swallowing the Past is a mockumentary set in a future Britain, where meat, eggs and dairy are outlawed. In this brave new age world, animals roam free, and there is no such thing as veganism, only “carnism”.

The Independent’s film reviewer, Max Benwell, writes:

“I’m not a vegan, but after watching Carnage, I’m even more certain that I should be. It’s completely unsustainable and cruel to eat meat and dairy, and more people need to realise this. But so far, many feel alienated by the vegan movement. Carnage works because it’s very funny, entertaining but also shows how society can be made to change its mind. It’s not about shaming anyone, or bombarding them with stats. Instead, the film asks a simple question: how will we look back on our treatment of animals in 50 years?”

Source: <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/carnage-review-bbc-iplayer-simon-amstell-vegan-comedy-actually-funny-a7636871.html>



The arts and popular culture have an important role to play in visioning and imagining the future. Strategically communicating creative content that visualises the world we want to live in, in particular authentically representing people from all backgrounds, will normalise the changes we want to see.³³

“The vision of the good society is lacking in the migration sector more than any other. Housing, climate – they seem to know what they want. Development – similarly. But we genuinely don’t have a cogent programme. And if there is any cogent programme – it’s nothing to do with refugees and more about welcome, bringing people together.”

Interviewee

“We need to find common ground – there’s strength in repeating a vision of the world we want to see, with people saying it from all quarters. But shared visioning – it’s really hard to do that work well.”

Interviewee

How can our communications seduce our audience with the promise of a future we can all be a part of?

How can celebrated festivals and events look to the future as well as reminiscing or memorialising the past?

How would you articulate your dreams for you, your community, your sector and your country? What can whole sectors learn from coaching methodologies, which use ‘future visioning’ as an exercise for people to chart their personal and organisational goals?

How can we feel competitive towards creating the best outcome or positive vision for the future, rather than feeling competitive towards one another?

What is the role of funders in supporting the articulation of a positive future vision?

33. For more on how pop culture can catalyse social change see: [Riding the Waves: How pop culture has the potential to catalyse social change in the UK](#)



3. The state of the sector

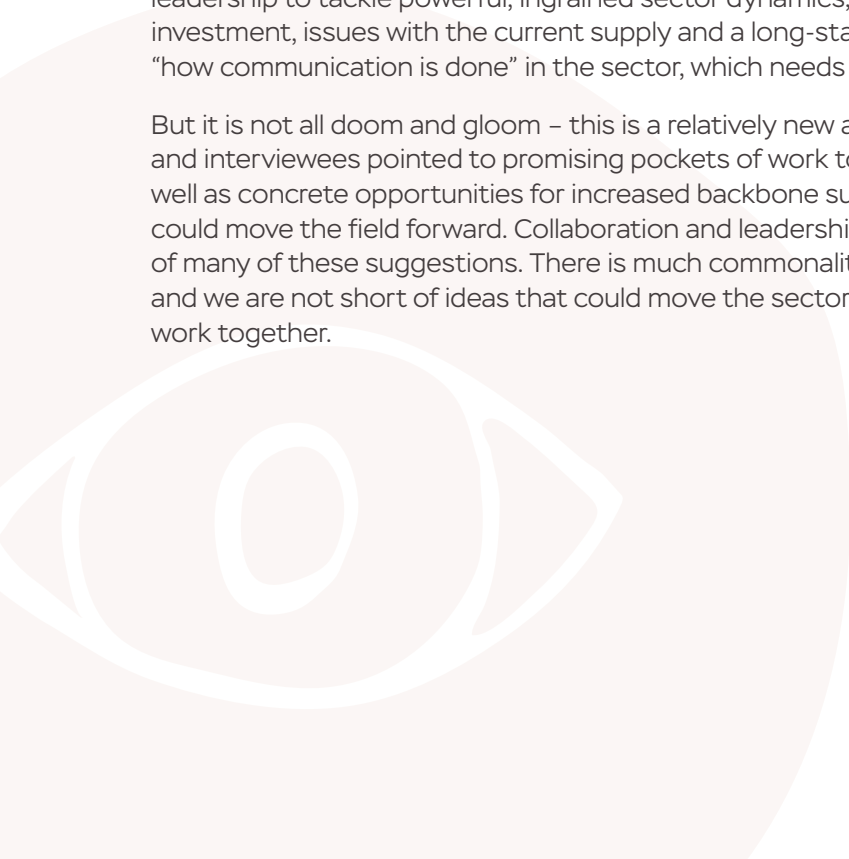
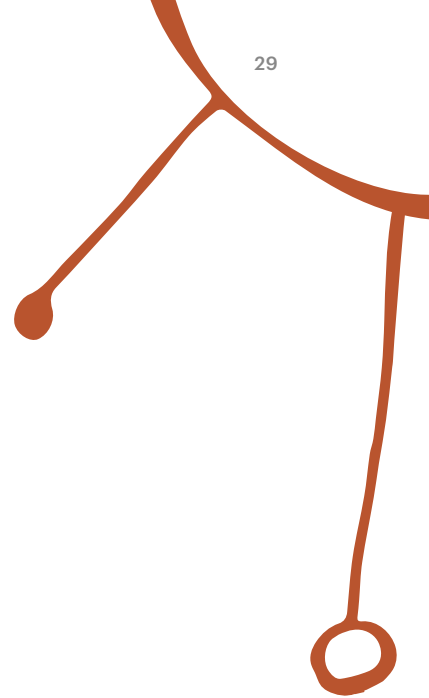
Strategic communications is a growing field generating excitement among progressive funders; pioneering charities, practitioners and communications leaders; with significant recent pieces of work focused on shifting communication and perception around specific social issues. Excitement about the new thinking stems partly from a growing realisation that the traditional model of charity communications does not deliver enough. In fact, it is potentially harmful if considered alongside charity fundraising scandals leading to an erosion in public trust.

As the examples in part two of this paper have shown, there are encouraging pockets of activity, with individual case studies and role models on good practice developing. However, overall strategic communications initiatives are often stand-alone pieces of work, there is little cross-issue learning and collaboration, what works is still being developed and not always agreed upon. Questions remain on how this work can find wider applicability in the sector and for the progressive cause; and how it can achieve its potential.

Strategic communications is taking root within a group of early adopters, and to those involved it is very compelling. But looking at the UK voluntary sector as a whole the field of those really understanding and consistently practicing it well, is small. As one interviewee put it “we are a bit above ground zero” another described it as “a fringe within the fringe.”

In this section, we look at the current state of communications in the voluntary sector to summarise interviewees’ views on the barriers that are holding the growth of strategic communications back – a lack of leadership to tackle powerful, ingrained sector dynamics, a shortage of investment, issues with the current supply and a long-standing culture of “how communication is done” in the sector, which needs challenging.

But it is not all doom and gloom – this is a relatively new and growing field, and interviewees pointed to promising pockets of work to learn from, as well as concrete opportunities for increased backbone support, which could move the field forward. Collaboration and leadership sit at the heart of many of these suggestions. There is much commonality to build on; and we are not short of ideas that could move the sector forward if we work together.





3.1 Lead the way: collaboration and leadership can overcome silos and reduce competition

The status quo

As several interviewees pointed out, the nature of the voluntary sector is not conducive to collaborating around longer term, strategic communications work or shared values. As one interviewee said commenting on the key barriers to the sector being more effective at communicating “it is the inherent condition (of the voluntary sector) that make it difficult to take a long-term view.” And according to another interviewee: “It’s clear that the field do not prioritise strategic communications. A lot of it is funder led. When communications posts are funded for and hired – most aren’t particularly strategic. Very few have imbibed the thinking on strategic communications and framing. There has been a lot of lip service.”

The sector is inherently competitive, with charities vying for funding, message, brand and airtime. Moreover, the reality that most individual charities operate in “survival mode” with the constant pressure to raise funds, means that short-term fundraising success, and with it questionable interventions such as emotional appeals evoking pity and provoking guilt, are routinely pitted over long-term message change - “Fundraising effectiveness is very different from changing hearts and minds.”

Added to this, charities and funders operate in silos, which means that the mechanisms to collaborate outside the regular sub-sector partnerships often do not exist. Tied to the primary objective to fulfil on their mission, large charities fall short of stepping into a sector leadership role that perhaps they should take on, and new challenging players that do things differently are met with scepticism. As one interviewee put it “it takes bravery to do it as it challenges convention. Other charities are more comfortable where they are.”

Sector leadership with respect to values-based messaging is an area where bigger charities can model leadership, but we are some way away from this being standardised practice, as one interviewee commented: “I’m not convinced that people have really operationalised values into their strategic communications.”

Where next?

Funders, in their powerful position as holders of both carrot and stick, can play a significant role in creating sector-wide change over time—and time it will take. An analogy here is how impact measurement has become common-practice from a very niche, academic field about 15-20 years ago—something that would be worth studying to see if lessons for sector wide change can be learned. Without a doubt, funder pressures and demand played a large role in achieving this shift.

Similarly, leading charities and sub-sector collaborations can be forces for change. They can be actors calling for change in their sectors, and lead



collaborative work. As one interviewee said “this should be the role of big charities, they can show leadership in their sector.” A positive example here is the recent promise of incoming new Oxfam CEO Dr Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah: “I also want us to acknowledge our particular responsibility as one of the bigger, better-resourced organisations in our sector. I am determined that Oxfam will be better – less super tanker, more dockyard – ready to use our resources and platform to empower and enable others in the sector to speak.”³⁴

The consensus from interviewees is that a “show, not tell” approach is most effective, with leading charities as well as funders driving collaborations of the willing to build expertise of what works (specific frames, shared values, metaphors, message guides), creating positive role models and sharing knowledge. Funders are also encouraged to create opportunities for civil society to work together on framing across different sectors.

The sector needs more positive examples and role models, encouraging others to follow suit. The attitude change towards stigma around mental health, as driven by the Mind and Rethink backed Time to Change³⁵ campaign is frequently cited as a successful example of changing narratives around a topic—but there is a need for more examples, particularly those that lead with shared values: “It’s not done very well in our field. If there has been tested stuff it tends to be about testing political sound bites, as opposed to values frames”.

Interviewees stressed that some sub-sectors, those less fragmented and smaller, or those with a leading charity willing to take on responsibility, are more ripe for adopting collaborative strategic communications approaches than others. As one interviewee said, “this requires energy, vision, leadership, openness and organisations willing to take a risk.” By then strategically increasing communications expertise in a sub-sector (e.g. through the funding of communications posts, hubs or networks) funders can support the changes being embedded.

One interviewee felt that collaboration around strategic communications worked best if they formed bottom-up on specific sub-issues, where there is already an existing collaboration in place. The pre-existence of good relationships and trust is the basis for successful, collaborative work – “this is easier to do where there is an underpinning energy and existing agreement to work together.” Conversely, areas where collaborations have to be built from scratch around framing, are even being imposed by funders, or are attempting to re-frame a sector as a whole are seen as much harder to pull off, “there is not enough leadership, trust and collaboration.”

34. Dr Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah
<https://oxfamapps.org/media/press-release/oxfam-ceo-keynote-speech-at-2019-ncvo-annual-conference>

35. <https://www.time-to-change.org.uk>



3.2 Shift the culture: communications as a strategic priority

The status quo

Several of the interviewees were critical of the state of the charity communications field as a whole, describing it as weak and traditional. This view extends to the quality of staff, the available training as well as the role played by cross-sector organisations.

“On the whole the field isn’t good at communicating on issues; often because there are such complicated issues to communicate. They are not clear on vision and outcome. The skill level within communications is average at best. Often the people in communications teams are not trained in media and communications. And they are often not in posts for that long. In the social justice sector it has historically been under invested in. The reality is there are a minority of funders willing to support communications work.”

Interviewee

As a result, traditional communications practices such as the obsession with airtime, the tendency to lead with problem-focused facts and guilt-inducing case studies that are “othering” beneficiaries, are the norm. These practices are embedded in how the sector thinks, is trained and therefore approaches its communication strategies.

In some cases communication messages do not get as far as setting out systemic problems; they can instead be reactive without clear, achievable asks: “Organisations are so used to being critical of government and being idealistic – that there are either too many asks or the ask is not there at all.”

A more structural issue linked to this is that communications as a “department” is by and large separate from a charity’s strategy, research and policy and functions. It is often not recognised as a very specific area of expertise, is mostly under-invested in and does not sit at the strategic heart of an organisation, but rather as an afterthought.

What next?

As one interviewee summed it up “The sector needs a culture shift. We need to change how the sector positions, values and funds communications work.” Another interviewee concurred “the sector needs to understand the basics and take a long, hard look at itself.”

Mechanisms to achieve this again rely on leading charities, collaborations as well as funders. There is a need to raise awareness of the current practices and their impact, the on-going erosion of public trust, while also providing simple, low-cost alternatives. A “show, not tell” approach is again recommended. An important area highlighted by several interviewees is the purposeful use of messengers and the need to show the benefits of training people with lived experience as spokespeople.



This is a challenging message implying that existing spokespeople and case studies do not work.

However, as one interviewee stressed this needs to be tackled with care. Change will not happen over-night as practices are deeply ingrained. Suggestions for change need to be carefully positioned as wanting to support organisations to achieve more for the common cause, rather than “being the comms police pointing out what people do wrong.”

Naturally a lot of the changes required in shifting practices require investment. There is a need for funders to prioritise investment in communications expertise—be it new positions, staff training, or external advice. One interviewee suggested creating more opportunities for communications staff to get together and exchange expertise on framing would be useful.

Further, the current research on strategic communications needs to be simplified and more training and guidance should be offered. The guides and toolkits published by the Public Interest Research Centre are seen as positive, accessible examples for this.³⁶ Other suggestions made were peer-to-peer mentoring as well as setting up a CPD like system of qualifications.

While this was not part of the remit of this research, the role and position of cross-sector bodies such as NCVO or Charity Comms is another area worth considering as their role as membership and sector leadership bodies puts them in a powerful position to drive change through training, accreditations and thought leadership.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, for it to be effective, strategic communications needs to become a matter of strategy – and move from its current position as an afterthought to a strategic question charity CEOs and boards grapple with. It needs to be seen as a powerful tool for achieving change, and should be given the same level of attention in an organisation’s “strategy tool box” like established approaches such as campaigning, organising, movement building or legal work. This is currently not the case. As one interviewee put it “if it’s seen as a comms activity, then you’re stuffed.” Strategic communications needs to re-position itself much more strongly on the strategic side and needs to move away from being seen a communications tool. Once adopted the approach needs to be internalised so that key values are embraced internally throughout the organisation as well as in external communications. Only a combination of strong internal buy-in, leadership and an organisation-wide commitment to embed and live out the new approach will make it credible and successful.

36. <https://publicinterest.org.uk/>



3.3 Shape through investment: support strategic communications to reach critical mass

The status quo

The lack of investment in strategic communications and communications as a whole was cited among one of the key barriers to the work reaching critical mass, as one interviewee commented: “There’s under-investment in expert communications to instigate frames, and not enough re-testing frames – because they can become obsolete. There’s not enough asking – did it actually work?” While we did not manage to get concrete investment figures, the number of funders named as those with an active interest in this space is small and goes hardly beyond the usual progressive leaders.

There is an important distinction between funding communication and funding strategic communication, as the latter needs more resource – as one interviewee noted: “Strategy without resource – it’s like a mirage”. Compared to the field in the US, the UK strategic communications sector is very small and there is little doubt that an increase in funders active in this space, as well as funding committed to the work, would provide momentum. The comparison with the US sector is often made and it would be worth researching what we can learn from the US sector; how did change happen; what were key drivers, and can we learn from it or emulate the process? For one, strengthening and bolstering the backbone of strategic communications through funding is crucial, as one interviewee reflected: “The backbone is necessary but fragile”.

Besides the shortage of investment, funders themselves are also seen as a barrier. As one interviewee said “they are probably as competitive as those they fund.” A few interviewees also noted that funders could do more to pick the sector up on poor practices. Further, they are seen in many cases as just as internally silo-ed as the sector, which means they fail to translate learning from one programmatic area to the next, and don’t do enough to encourage collaboration across issue areas.

What next?

The obvious answer here is investment both in terms of overall volume, but also in terms of the number of funders active in this space. This is of course not as easy as just writing a cheque as funder investment needs to be strategic and thoughtful, to manage power dynamics and legitimacy issues. Further, funders need to be able to find enough opportunities to fund, and long-term investment into strategic communications needs to gain board buy-in, which can be a challenge.

Engagement with leading funders and cross-sector bodies, as well as reaching out to other funders across issue areas—e.g. between social justice and environmental funders—can reduce silos. One interviewee stressed that more learning between funders, as well as internally within funders having multiple programmatic focus areas, could lead to progress.



3.4 Build expertise: supplement existing expertise to build capacity

The status quo

While there is a lot of respect for the quality of current framing expertise in some areas, several interviewees also stressed that limitations in framing knowledge and capacity were holding the field back. The existing supply of framing expertise and advice is largely seen as high end and expensive, putting engagement with the approach out of reach for the vast majority of the sector—and putting smaller charities off. There is a lack of lower cost options, and not enough visibility of what alternative approaches may be.

Further, interviewees also pointed out that some of the existing work does not do enough to build capacity within organisations—it is seen as an outsourced “black box” service, which means that building internal skills and managing consistent implementation are seen as challenges.

“My point of view is that we need more resources to do joined up work across different sectors – to help communicators get to know their audience. Rather than black box research where someone else is paid to do it and you don’t have any interaction until the end. It’s mysterious and outsourced, rather than using the opportunity to skill up within your team.”

Interviewee

One interviewee described how organisations possibly also underestimate the implementation challenges and put the bulk of the investment into the upfront framing research without then having a clear strategy of how the new messages can be systematically communicated. One interviewee said “never spend money on framing if you then don’t know how to implement it.”

In general, application and implementation are seen as the areas that need more understanding and research. There are different models of how an organisation commissioning framing research can then involve a wider group of charities, or even a field, to share the messages, but it is too early to see a consensus on good practice emerging.

Finally, strategic communications is perceived as an exciting but largely untested field as the evidence base for the work is too thin. While framing is seen as compelling and showing anecdotal evidence of impact, there is a lack of robust impact information, making it easy for critics to question the work.

What next?

Strategic communications has an image problem. The current perception of it being a highly complex, academic and expensive field needs to be addressed for it to gain wider traction. “The narrative of it being a slightly elitist, intellectual pursuit hoisted by funders is still there.”



There is a strong need to highlight low cost, easily adaptable “every day” changes that can be taken as a first step by any charity without a significant investment in resources. One interviewee said “it is intellectually impressive work, conceptually interesting but not necessarily translatable into usable stuff.”

Thought leadership in this area around simple do’s and don’ts could help de-mystify the field and ensure that it isn’t just seen as something for funders and charities with very deep pockets. As one interviewee put it “people are interested, but there is a lot of scratching of heads as to how to apply it.”

Increasing understanding of what works and sharing it in the form of case studies, guides and events is also seen as helpful. A number of organisations are beginning to carry out field wide work to increase the take up of strategic communications in their respective sectors. NEON took a collaborative and co-creative approach to ‘framing the economy’ and are implementing via messaging days, presentations and a press officer network. JRF are hoping to increase the reach of their work on reframing poverty by investing in toolkits and events. Sharing the results on the effectiveness of these approaches will also be crucial.

There is a need for robust evaluation to demonstrate the impact of the work, and measure the effectiveness of different approaches. Investment in what works on application and implementation is particularly required, as one interviewee put it “research on framing is done, but understanding implementation is key.” There is also a need to invest in thorough evaluation of the work, to further make the case for further investment in the area.

For those organisations investing in framing work, there is a need to be aware of what consistent implementation involves and how much of an organisation wide culture change this can be. It requires planning, resourcing, monitoring and consistent change. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is a leader in this area, developing internal messenger guides, peer-to-peer training and working with a wide range of partners to share learning and distil messages.

This will require funders investing in framing work to see it as part of their remit to share the work, build knowledge of what works and reach out to others.

Where next?

For charities:

- How can we consider communications not as a separate add-on department to our policy, research or programmes teams, but as a strategic tool for change? In particular, it would be valuable to include strategic communications on the agenda of the senior leadership and board and is most likely an area that warrants internal investment.



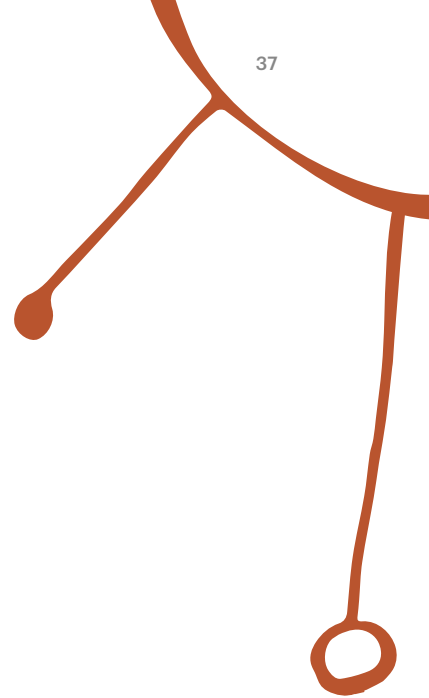
- Might it be possible to experiment with abandoning current short-termist fundraising practices aimed at quick wins, and build positive campaigns with messages aimed at strengthening values in the longer-term?

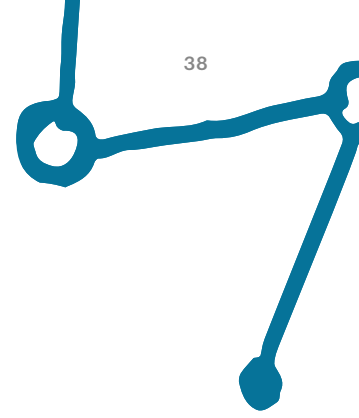
For cross-sector bodies:

- Cross-sector organisations have tremendous insight across a range of areas, which can be valuable to share with others. Many cross-sector organisations will be playing an influential role driving innovation and positively changing practice. Our research unearthed a real appetite for training, guidance, conferences, accreditations and advice on how to adopt strategic communications practices. Cross-sector organisations will be well placed to offer up this sort of support.

For funders:

- Many funders are playing a key role investing into the backbone, research, evidence of what works and stimulating debate. This needs to continue, but it is also valuable to fund efforts aimed at ensuring initiatives are more connected, to share learning and maximise the building of field capacity.
- There may well be opportunities for funders to support low-cost, easy-to-implement changes in charity communications (such as joint communication around shared values) that could be applied by the sector at large, including those charities without significant funds to spend on externally commissioned work.





4. Collaboration for change

Strategic communication is about more than the words we use and the way we frame them. Part One of this report urges the sector to recognise that there is a fundamental stage to strategic communications that begins before we open our mouths or commit words to the page. This involves deep listening, connecting with our audience, considering the significance of non-verbal communication, and 'gifting' our communications. We are enthused by the prospect of a voluntary sector that works collaboratively to bring people together across the political spectrum towards an authentic, positive vision for the future.

Our research and interviews demonstrate that despite strategic communications being a niche field in the UK, best practice is emerging, largely driven by leading practitioners, funders and charities. Part Two set out how leading with shared values, the effective use of authentic messengers, highlighting the systemic root causes of issues and communicating positive solutions are all key building blocks to effective strategic communications in the voluntary sector. There is much good practice to learn from, more than we were able to include in this research. But it is also useful to look beyond our own voluntary sector examples and also reflect on the approach of commercial and advertising campaigns.

Part Three's assessment of the state of the sector grasps the nettle around the barriers for strategic communications to become common practice. Some of them, such as competition and the primacy of the fundraising message are fundamental challenges to the voluntary sector, others, such as a lack of investment, can perhaps be more readily addressed. However, we recognise that sector wide change takes time and the status quo should be something to be aware of, but not disheartened by. Our interviewees had plenty of suggestions about how the field could move on, in terms of leadership, the positioning of communications as a matter of organisational strategy, an increase in investment and the building of expertise, most notably of more low cost, accessible alternatives. Providing additional backbone support will continue to play a big role in all of this.

Where does this leave us?

What cuts across many of the suggestions made in this report are the themes of agency and collaboration. The existing best practice has emerged off the back of leading organisations working hard to establish strategic communications in the UK, but this has largely been focused on one organisation or one issue at a time. There has not been enough effort spent on sharing, collaborating and cross-sector working to push collectively in the same direction. This is important, especially as Common Cause Foundation's research, *No Cause is an Island*, indicates that we can



shift the dial on a range of social and environmental issues by activating and motivating our shared intrinsic values.

The field needs charities, funders, cross-sector bodies, existing collaborations and practitioners to see it as their role and responsibility to move the whole field forward; to create and share best practice and act as role models so others will follow. In particular, we urge the sector to discuss how a focus less on issues and more on values could help to progress multiple causes towards shared goals. With this goal in mind, we need to foster collaboration, share good practice and focus our commonalities together to build wider movements.

Events such as the Learning Exchange in May 2019 are important to bring together leading thinkers, practitioners and funders in this area to facilitate agency and collaboration and will hopefully be a first step for more connected working. As one of our interviewees commented: “Learning exchanges encourage connection and cross working. They can help people within the sector to understand basic approaches to strategic communications.” In particular, we urge the Learning Exchange to explore ways that competition in the voluntary sector could be re-imagined, i.e. to be competitive towards creating the best outcome or positive vision for the future, rather than being competitive towards one another. We hope this will help to unlock the cycle of the voluntary sector forcing its communications into a position of ‘who can shout the loudest?’ There is no doubt that funders will play an important role in creating a competitive climate that has this goal in mind.

Above all, we recognise that this is an emerging field with plenty of potential. There is a need for more robust evaluation to monitor effectiveness and build up an evidence base of what works. To quote Julia Unwin “framing is not a silver bullet”³⁷, but joined up strategic communications can play an influential role in unifying the voluntary sector to strengthen shared values and push in the same direction.

We hope this research has identified questions and challenges that will form the basis of further research and discussion. Below, we group together some of the key questions raised in the report, reflecting on the cross-sector issues, as well as specific questions for both charities and funders specifically.

Overarching questions for the sector as a whole:

- What is the objective of our strategic communications? Directional, targeted messages to change minds? Or relational connecting messages to strengthen shared values and mutual understanding?
- How can we reflect more on the feelings that our communication creates, and not just on the words we use?
- What can we learn from other sectors such as advertising and marketing in how to prime effectively and communicate authentically?

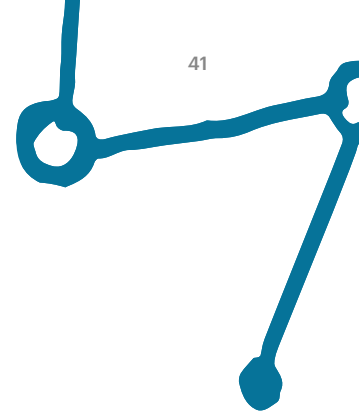
37. Unwin J, Confessions of a framing sceptic
<http://www.juliaunwin.com/confessions-of-a-framing-sceptic/>, 2018



- How can we as a sector be more positive, future-focused and collaborative in our communications in general?
- Are there opportunities to show solidarity and support for completely different issues where there are underpinning shared values?
- What can we learn from the US, where the strategic communications sector is more developed, better funded, and more widespread? How can we learn from and emulate these approaches?
- What can we learn from other changes that have taken root in the UK voluntary sector (e.g. impact measurement becoming more common practice)? How did they happen? What and who were drivers? Are there shortcuts we could draw on?
- How can we better evaluate, share what works and create a body of evidence (i.e. practical case studies, research on frames and implementation as well as their effectiveness)?
- How can we best promote simple, every day actions that we could take to be more effective and unified with our communications?

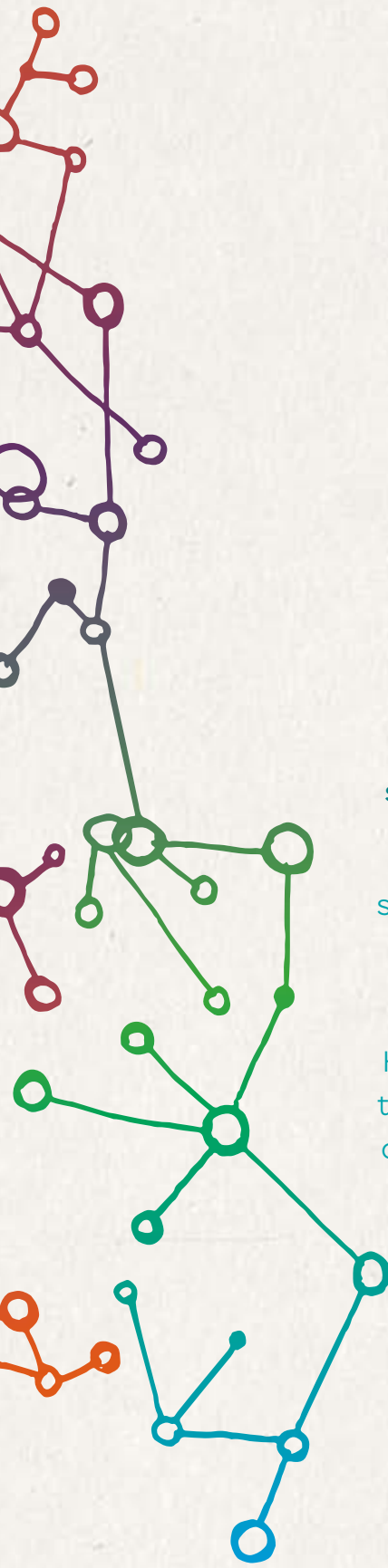
Specific questions for charities:

- How can we communicate by leading with shared values, but also maintain the nuance of our message by bringing in systemic issues that get to the heart of the problem?
- How can we make sure our strategic communications always has a clear unified call to action or specific policy-ask?
- What makes an authentic messenger? How can we work more closely and authentically with messengers?
- How can we ensure that we carefully listen to the complexity of people's thoughts and feelings rather than label and define them in a simplistic way?
- How can major organisations working on distinct social issues partner up and support one another's work where there are similar values that sit beneath the work?
- Social media is often used by organisations as a megaphone. How can we be more relational in the way our organisations use social media? Could we tweet more about another sector's issue or campaign? Where do our values align and overlap with other organisations – could we tweet more in solidarity? How can we share on social media the positive work practices we have, or the achievements of our staff?



Specific questions for funders:

- What is the role for funders in building strategic communications expertise within the sector (i.e. training, storytelling, peer to peer work, sharing good practice, building evidence, how-to guides etc.)?
- How can donors encourage organisations to work together and to develop cross-sector partnerships on strategic communications, through the funding calls they put out?
- How can donors bring people and different organisations together to connect and build trusting relationships across and between sectors (both in the UK and more widely)?
- How can current funding models do more to encourage collaboration, rather than competition?
- What would a funding approach aimed at strengthening shared values look like? And would funding to encourage organisations working on different issues to work together on amplifying and strengthening shared values be feasible in the longer term?



MORE THAN WORDS

How can we reflect more on the **feelings** that our communication creates, and not just on the words we use?

How can we as a sector be more positive, **future-focused** and collaborative in our communications in general?

How can we work together to better evaluate, **share what works** and create a body of evidence?

How can major organisations working on distinct social issues partner up and support one another's work where there are **similar values** that sit beneath the work?

How can donors encourage organisations to work together and to develop **cross-sector partnerships** on strategic communications, through the funding calls they put out?

*“Words are only painted fire;
a look is the fire itself”*

Mark Twain