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Foreword: Building the Field of Public Interest Communications

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Introduction

Let's begin where all the best stories do--a dark and stormy night. On this particular dark and stormy night in 1748, a slave ship captain returning home as a passenger on a ship to England was trapped just off the coast of Donegal, Ireland. The storm had torn a hole in the side of the hold. As the ship was thrown throughout the ocean, the captain cried out to God and begged for his life.

Miraculously, the story goes, the cargo shifted–covering the hole in the side of the ship and making it possible to limp to shore. The incident, John Newton wrote in his autobiography, led to his conversion to Christianity. It would set him on the path of joining the abolitionist movement and working to end the slave trade.

In 18th century Europe, there was wide belief that slavery was a moral outrage. But few believed that it would be possible to end a practice so strongly tied to the economic power of the nations who engaged in it.

In 1787, Newton joined with political and cultural leaders in a print shop in London to launch their efforts to end slavery. Josiah Wedgewood–a young industrialist who had identified a way to manufacture porcelain that made it more affordable–a member of parliament, journalists, a freed slave, and faith leaders joined him.

Together they hatched a plan to break the economic ties to slavery and convince parliament to outlaw the practice. Their campaign included enlisting women in a boycott of sugar–a product produced almost entirely by slave labor. The boycott reduced demand for the product by 30 percent, simultaneously reducing the need for slaves to produce it.

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Two now-famous images resulted from their efforts. The first, a map of a slave ship's human cargo, was widely distributed throughout England's taverns and public houses. The second is an image of a black man on his knees in chains. The words *Am I not a man and a brother?* encircle it. The image–which might be called a logo for the movement–became fashionable throughout Europe and adorned cufflinks, snuffboxes, and charms. It was Wedgewood's work, a contribution more lasting than the charming scenes of young romance that decorated most of his factories' products. Their efforts succeeded in 1807 when Parliament passed a bill that forbade British slave ships from sailing from British ports.

I encountered this story in Jarol Manheim's book, *Strategy in Information and Influence Campaigns* (Manheim, 2011). He refers to it as perhaps one of the first social justice campaigns. It certainly carries every element of a successful campaign we would see today.

Let's review some major steps forward, the advances we have made as a society to create a world in which fairness, health, and wellness are available to all--a reduction in smoking rates, ending racial segregation, increasing gender parity. A casual observer might attribute those changes to a natural evolution and a collective awakening that righted what was wrong. But closer scrutiny reveals that in each case, there were thoughtful strategists advancing that change through the careful and thoughtful use of strategic communications. And in many of those cases, there were people working nearly as hard to ensure that those changes didn't happen.

As the first Karel Chair for Public Interest Communications, I crave stories like this. Frank Karel, who served two terms as vice president for communications at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, understood the critical importance of this level of strategic communications for social change to addressing those things in the world that are unhealthy, unsafe, or unjust.

Frank graduated from the University of Florida in 1961, at a time when the University still wasn't accepting African-American students and had only recently started to accept women. He was a journalism major who went on to report for the Gainesville Sun and became the Miami Herald's first science reporter. His accounts of John Glenn's space flights got him A1 space, but he was dissatisfied. He knew that the news media could affect opinions and behavior, but he saw greater opportunity to do good by moving into the non-profit world.

His work brought him to communications positions with the National Cancer Institute, the Commonwealth Fund, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. He left RWJF to join the grantmaking team at the Rockefeller Foundation, but when RWJF asked him to chair a search for a new vice president for communications, everyone agreed that there was no stronger or more willing candidate than Frank himself. He started his second term in 1993.

The next year, he hired me as the very lowest person in the pecking order on RWJF's fast-growing communications team. My job was to answer the press line, photocopy news clips, and alphabetize videos. But I was surrounded by brilliant minds and a team he had built with great care. His communications officers were smart, scrappy storytellers and strategists with tremendous autonomy to build their networks and develop thoughtful strategies to accelerate the effectiveness of RWJF's funding initiatives.

The role of the communications team wasn't to promote the foundation, but to make everything RWJF funded more effective. In fact, Frank, his officers, and the foundation's board adhered to a policy of eschewing publicity. It was so common to hear *we speak through our grantees* that it was impossible to know who said it first. But the tidy phrase obscured a brilliant strategy to drive change.

It was Frank and a small cadre of his colleagues who urged then-president Steve Schroeder and the board of trustees to take on the tobacco industry. Today, programs that he was among the first to support are behind the lowest smoking rates among youth since their highpoint in the late 1940s. Then, nearly half of Americans smoked. Today, in states where progress has been made and maintained, fewer than six percent of young people do (Bach, 2016). A recent Surgeon General's report says that people who don't start smoking before they turn 25 are unlikely to ever start ("Preventing Tobacco Use," n.d.). Frank understood that strategic communications is the accelerant on the fire of social change. He also recognized its unique role and potential to "to help a field move from A to B" (Karel, 2000, p. 4). Social change communications is not the visceral street fight of activism, the careful donor curation of nonprofit public relations, or the strategic publicity role associated with corporate social responsibility. It is more directive than the critically important journalism that brings injustice to light and calls out corruption. Public interest communications is a special form of communications whose unique role is taking on the world's demons and inequities. It transcends the interest of any single institution or individual.

Frank also recognized that for those taking on this highly specialized role, there was no training, no education, no scholarship, and very little community. Those trying to use communications to make the world better were making it up every day.

After he retired from RWJF and began to contemplate his legacy, Frank recognized that using communications to drive change is a skill learned largely in the field, on the ground, and in the heat of battle. Those who work in the field come from backgrounds in journalism, public relations, or public policy. No one had the opportunity to choose a career in the field as an undergraduate.

So, Frank, with the support of his wife Betsy and the counsel of close friends--including Andy Burness who had worked closely with Frank as one of his first hires at RWJF and went on to establish one of the first agencies devoted solely to non-profit organizations and causes–decided to endow a chair to develop and nurture the field to which he had devoted his own career.

Frank laid out three objectives for the chair:

1. Create a curriculum.
2. Build community among those who work in the field in which people share the best of what they know and continually apply best practice.
3. Nurture and promote the scholarship that can improve practice or that further defines public interest communications as a unique academic discipline.

Creating a curriculum has necessitated trying to distill the fundamental aspects of public interest communications. What does it look like? What kinds of practices make one effort more successful than another? What is the vocabulary for change? What is the structure of an effective change effort? How does one codify an effective change effort? What resources might a

practitioner look to develop a campaign in a new area? What confidence might he or she have that they would work? Which elements are shared by effective campaigns?

In developing a curriculum for this field, I have attempted to capture these from work undertaken by those I admire, from my own experience, and from reviewing successful change efforts from history. These are early thoughts, and while there's much experience to support them, they require the careful testing of scholarship to hone them.

At the root of every public interest communications effort is a desire to drive change that's rooted in fact. But facts themselves are crummy advocates. They're often complex and dull, which is part of the reason that they're ignored by policy. An effective effort builds on what we know to be true about a particular social challenge with what we know to be true about what makes people act. Behavioral science can give us significant insight to why the most effective campaigns have worked and holds significant potential to fuel more effective campaigns.

There are few references to public interest communications used in this sense that predates Frank's gift agreement with the University of Florida. The Center for Science in the Public Interest, formed in the 1970, advocates for a healthier and safer food supply. Fenton Communications has identified itself as a public interest communications agency since its founding in 1982 and uses the term to describe the agency's specific focus on cause-related campaigns.

Of course, what is and is not public interest communications is a matter of debate and the answers are not always clear. Who does more to advance the interest of the public--those who fight for reproductive rights and access to abortion services for all women or those who fight for the end of abortion? Are groups like the NRA who advocate for gun owners' rights and the defense of the second amendment of the U.S. Constitution working in greater interest than those who advocate for background checks and fewer guns in the hands of those who would use them to kill others?

In a book chapter Jasper Fessmann (2016, pp.13-14) wrote, he defined public interest communications as "the development and implementation of science-based, planned strategic communication campaigns with the goal of achieving significant and sustained positive behavioural change on a public interest issue that transcends the particular interest of any single organization."

I have recently amended it to "the development and implementation of science-based, strategic communications with the goal of significant and sustained positive behavior change or action on an issue that transcends the particular objectives of any single organization" (Christiano & Neimand, 2017, p. 38).

The addition of *action* acknowledges the work of Julia Coffman at the Harvard Family Research Project, who wrote in her paper, *Public Communication Campaign Evaluation: An Environmental Scan of Challenges, Criticisms, Practice and Opportunities*:

There are two types of public communication campaigns: (1) individual behavior change campaigns that try to change in individuals the behaviors that lead to social problems or promote behaviors that lead to improved individual behavior or social well-being and (2) public will campaigns that attempt to mobilize pubic action for policy change. (2002, p. 2)

These two types of campaigns are instructive as we look at how we build strategy.

The strategic planning process for public interest campaigns

In PIC's sister disciplines of public relations and marketing, there are widely accepted strategic planning processes that begin with research and conclude with evaluation. And public interest communication certainly differs from these disciplines more in purpose than form. The best campaigns in any discipline are informed by theory, fueled by scholarship and sharpened with strong primary research. Each of these disciplines draws heavily on scholarship from psychology and sociology.

However, when it comes to choosing strategic direction, the systems-level focus of most public interest communications efforts requires a broader focus. I have identified six spheres in which these kinds of campaigns operate. Again, this is an approach that should be tested.

The six spheres of influence

Most successful efforts work in some combination of six spheres of influence through which it is possible to affect behavior, opinions, and decisions. Deciding which of these spaces to work in is a critical strategic decision and must be linked to a carefully considered theory of change. The spheres are as follows.

Media

The effect of media on opinions and behavior is well documented. Whether through agenda-setting theory or most theories associated with mass communication, the role that media has in affecting perceptions of the importance of an issue, creating master narratives, or building the credibility of a particular approach or perspective can't be underestimated.

However, in an age where mass media consumption is giving way to far narrower channels associated with social media, podcasting, and platforms that allow one to carefully curate which outlets and ideas one is exposed to, media are a less reliable and more complex tool for change. Much has and will be written about the news media and role of journalism in shaping behavior, opinion, and action. How the change agent can work effectively in this domain changes constantly. For example, a cover story in the *New York Times Magazine* at one time virtually ensured that a program or idea would gain the attention and support of policymakers and other influentials. But in an increasingly fractured America, that kind of coverage is equally likely to build mistrust among those who discount mainstream media.

Working within this sphere has always required a clear focus on target audiences and an understanding of the desired outcome. For example, when a group of us at RWJF wanted to establish the credibility and viability of The Greenhouse project as a financially viable and appealing alternative to traditional nursing homes, we knew we had to reach investors and

financiers. So instead of pitching a human-interest story to *CBS Sunday Morning*, a product largely consumed by would-be residents, we instead went to the Wall Street Journal, which has credibility within the financial community. The story Linda Loranger at Burness and I pitched was not a heartwarming story of seniors enjoying community and home-cooked meals. Instead, it spoke of the financial viability of the model and the fact that Greenhouses represent a cost-neutral alternative to more expensive but less appealing approaches to long-term care (Lagnado, 2008).

Policy

The policy sphere refers to advocacy for laws and government-funded programs that drive change. Policies can mandate individual behavior, but can't work alone to ensure that the particular behavior will be adopted. They can also make it easier for people to act in their own interest or protect the rights of those who are vulnerable.

Effective policy is fundamentally in the public's interest, and the debate that surrounds enactment of any policy closely mirrors the debate about what is the public's interest. Working in the policy domain is complicated. Policymakers themselves often activate media or communities of influence to ignite change and are often themselves members of communities of influence.

It is also true that law doesn't perfectly direct behavior. For example, in the United States, wearing a seatbelt is required in every state, and yet seatbelt use runs around 90 percent (Pickrell & Li, 2016). It is not legal to drink before one turns 21, but underage drinking is common and well-documented ("Underage Drinking," n.d.). The Clean Water Act protects our waterways, and yet our waterways are under constant attack from pollutants ("2015 Major Criminal Cases," n.d.).

Communities of influence

For any issue, there is a collection of scholars, celebrities, activists, and advocates who connect with an issue and whose research and opinions shape how others see an issue. Their efforts will often affect others' decisions to act on an issue.

Communities of influence are broad and can be loosely or closely connected. Members of a community of influence include people who do not share an opinion or perspective on an issue. For example, communities of influence on health in jails and prisons include sheriffs, directors of community health centers, corporate prisons, and public health officials tasked with improving the health of a community. They also include county officials and scholars who study prisoners' rights and criminal justice, and who examine health data by county. This varied group could not possibly share a perspective on issues related to criminal justice, but certainly influence the thoughts, opinions, and actions of others, including members of the media and policymakers.

The market

Social change unfolds within larger economic systems and business can have a significant role in furthering or hindering change. Similarly, activists can engage in activities that affect corporate values or brand equity.

A boycott of sugar was a central tent pole in that social justice campaign to end slavery. When advocates, foundations, and the federal government teamed up to take on the tobacco industry, one of the first lines of attack was to create policies that made it far more difficult to sell tobacco to children. In response to a challenging business environment in the United States, American tobacco companies sought new markets in far less-regulated Asian countries. In China, the smoking rate among men is more than 60 percent, with no signs of turning around (Chen, Peto, Zhou, Iona, Smith, Yang, Guo, Chen, Bian, Lancaster, Sherliker, Pang, Wang, Su, Wu, Wu, Chen, Collins, & Li, 2015).

For their part, business can engage with key stakeholders through corporate social responsibility or take on causes of their own through corporate social advocacy. When these kinds of efforts take on environmental or gender issues, they are sometimes labeled as greenwashing or pinkwashing. However, it is impossible to ignore the agenda-setting roles and significant change that large corporate policies can engender. Target Stores ("Continuing To Stand," 2016) changed the conversation about bathrooms for people who are transgendered by announcing a storewide policy that would allow people to use the bathrooms designated for the gender they identify with. Walmart has engaged in creating healthier diets for Americans by agreeing to decrease the amount of fat, sugar, and sodium in their products over a period of several years (Meczkowski, 2016). Starbucks famously promoted conversations about race through the controversial #racetogether effort ("What 'Race Together' Means," 2015), and also made college more attainable for their employees by agreeing to fund their online education.

For their part, activist and advocacy groups often target corporations in their own efforts. For example, when Color of Change (Hoffman, 2012) sought to decrease the American Legislative Exchange Council's (ALEC) influence on voters' rights bills, the group coordinated successful boycotts of the corporations that contributed most to ALEC's funding.

Like every other sphere, this one isn't tidy. Companies like Coca-Cola have a role in the obesity crisis, but have also been a critical voice for change and tolerance (Wertheimer, 2015). Starbucks has been accused of reshaping towns by pushing small coffee shops out of business, but has also taken on the issue of income inequality by making it easier for their employees to get college degrees ("Access," n.d.).

Toward that end, faith leaders and celebrities pressured universities and large corporations to disinvest in South Africa, creating financial pressure to end apartheid (MacAskill, 2015). Today, activists are boycotting Chick-fil-a and Hobby Lobby over their respective stances on marriage equality and reproductive rights.

Activism

Activism is direct action on behalf of a cause that can include protests, boycotts, marches, and political organizing. Activism is deeply rooted in U.S. history. The founding fathers rebelled and protested British control. Suffragists protested unfair voting policies. Workers protested unfair labor practices. Political, social, and environmental activism has been a critical element of

advancing civil rights, ending the war in Vietnam, and ensuring women the right to vote and sit on juries.

Activism's effectiveness is always bolstered by a larger strategy that draws on the other spheres. Marches generate media attention, which can elevate the significance of an issue. Boycotts can make it impossible for a corporation to ignore the interests of a specific group, as Color of Change successfully demonstrated.

But in the absence of a specific call to action that's tied to a larger goal, they can flounder. Moreover, it can be hard to determine the direct connection between activism and change. Jo Ann Robinson and other members of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement in Montgomery, Alabama, engineered a stunningly successful boycott of city busses in 1955. The boycott continued until legal segregation on public busses ended with a 1956 U.S. Supreme Court decision. One could argue, however, that the class action suit (Adler, 2009) launched by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People after Claudette Colvin and others were arrested for refusing to give up their seats earlier that year was the real driver of change.

Social marketing

In 1951, G.D. Wiebe, a psychologist working for the Canadian Broadcasting System Radio asked the question, "In these frightening times, the question persists: why can't you sell brotherhood and rational thinking like you sell soap?" (Wiebe, 1951, p. 679).

According to Jeff French, who wrote an editorial on the history of social marketing in a recent edition of *Social Marketing Quarterly*, Wiebe was wondering whether it was possible to use radio and TV to sell social issues. This question launched a larger exploration of using the principles of marketing to sell new behaviors and opinions (French, 2015).

It turns out Wiebe was right and today an entire field is devoted to this approach to social change. Social marketing has reduced smoking rates (Healey, Zimmerman, & Healton, 2010), increased screening for detectable diseases (Lefebvre & Flora, 1988), increased condom use (Kennedy, Mizuno, Seals, Myllyluoma, & Weeks-Norton, 2000), popularized the idea of designated drivers (Harvard Alcohol Project, n.d.), been employed to reduce texting and driving (Crouch, 2013), and taken on shooting deaths in Chicago's most violent neighborhoods (Butts, Roman, Bostwick, & Porter, 2015). Matched with policy change, it can be an effective way to get people to avoid behaviors that are already illegal. While the other spheres focus on creating the larger context for change, social marketing focuses on getting people to adopt new, healthier behaviors at the individual level.

Together, these spheres comprise a powerful arsenal for change and choosing which spheres to work in are some of the most critical decisions a change strategist can make.

Tools for driving change

The transcendent nature of public interest communications efforts creates a fundamental challenge: When an effort transcends the particular interest of any organization or individual, how will it be funded? True public interest communications is most often undertaken by those working in government, non-profits, and foundations, or by agencies who work on their behalf. This means that investments in communications are often small, particularly when compared to an investment made by an industry marketing a product. Wiebe (1951) correctly noted that the same tools that sell soap could sell brotherhood. However, Unilever's budget (Kolstad, 2006) for the Dove Real Beauty campaign would likely dwarf the annual budget available to the Human Rights Campaign (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, n.d.)

This means that it's imperative that public interest communicators are focused, strategic, and use their resources with great care. The most effective campaigns follow these five rules:

1. They're visual, and even when the tactics they use are not explicitly visual, they rely heavily on visual metaphor to communicate core concepts.
2. They connect with the values of their target audience.
3. They use stories that engage new constituents in their cause.
4. Their calls-to-action are concrete, focused, and have an obvious connection to the goal.
5. They make use of emotion in surprising ways.

Why do we require a research agenda that's unique to PIC?

As a robust community of practice and scholars has started to coalesce around the concept of public interest communications as both a unique area of practice and a unique academic discipline, we have struggled with the question of how best to build this field. Do we seek out and nurture scholarship that defines the field as unique and that has its own place among advertising, public relations, and journalism? Or is it more valuable to nurture and celebrate scholarship across a range of disciplines that can be applied to better practice? In a field that is interdisciplinary in both practice and scholarship, we clearly need both.

Two dynamics drive the urgency of these tasks: the first is the vibrant community of changemakers increasingly identifying with a culture of excellence in which they share the best of what they know at annual gathering called *frank*. The second is a growing community of scholars who are equally eager to collaborate and generate work that accelerates the greater good. These groups are deeply intertwined and each has expressed a desire to be more informed by the other. This phenomenon has become a defining element of the *frank* gathering.

Looking ahead

Establishing public interest communications as an academic discipline will require more than building the community, establishing a curriculum, and nurturing scholarship. New institutions will need to adopt the idea as their own. In a study of how degree-granting programs become institutionalized, Brint, Proctor, Hanneman, Mulligan, Rotunid, & Murphy (2010, p. 564) noted, "Innovations that do not penetrate among a few schools are destined to fail, except perhaps as very small niche cultures. Only when a field has a foothold in a broader stratum of institutions is its future in academe relatively secure."

This obviously signals the importance of spreading public interest communications to new institutions. For this community of practitioners and scholars, though, it also signals the importance of diverse perspectives and robust scholarship from a range of disciplines. It also signals the importance of constantly refreshing the field with new scholarship and practice.
Today the field is small enough that people from both practice and scholarship see themselves as part of a single community. As it grows, it will be critical that this connection remains tied to the identity of those who will build this field.

This journal is fundamental to this goal.

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