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JPIC Editorial Board


Special thanks to our recent reviewers

We would like to take this opportunity to extend a special thanks to the reviewers who contributed to the new issue. Your expertise and hard work make our journal’s success possible.

Maria Bryan, Barbara Myslik
A NEW ERA OF JPIC

KELLY CHERNIN, CODY HAYS, AND JOSEPH RADICE
A year has passed, and much like the world we seek to change, the *Journal of Public Interest Communications* has also evolved. We would first like to introduce you to our new co-editors. Kelly Chernin, Editor of Academic Research, is an Assistant Professor at Appalachian State University’s Department of Communication. Kelly’s primary research focuses are the aftermath of social movements, specifically Hong Kong’s pro-democracy movement, public interest communications, and science communications. Cody Hays, Editor of Practitioner Reports, is the Founder and CEO of Marketing Mission. Cody’s work in nonprofit marketing involves helping busy nonprofit founders, executive directors, and fundraisers maximize their marketing and streamline their time. Joseph Radice, Managing Editor, is a linguist and researches LGBTQ+ identity construction, language use, and the dynamics of social power therein. Together, we look forward to ushering in a new era of *JPIC* content.

While *JPIC* may have a new(ish) editorial team,¹ we remain committed to the original goal of the journal established by Linda Hon and Brigitta Brunner. In Brigitta’s farewell essay, she thanked many individuals who have helped make our work at the journal possible, including Lauren Griffin and Jasper Fessmann. We are honored to continue the tradition started by our forerunners, making *JPIC* a space where scholars, activists, and practitioners are able to share their ideas and research.

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¹ You will likely recognize a few familiar names on the editorial team: Kelly Chernin and Joseph Radice. Kelly served as Managing Editor from 2017-2019 and has since served on the *JPIC* review board. Joseph Radice has been the Managing Editor since 2019.
When the first issue was published in 2017, the contributors discussed the importance of building the field, conceptual foundations, and the importance of scholarship. They also discussed more nuanced considerations for the field, such as how PIC could promote community engagement and civic professionalism, the role of the public interest in public diplomacy, connections between PIC and social psychology, and how social media could be leveraged to promote climate change initiatives. We have come a long way since 2017, publishing articles about healthcare, racial justice, and corporate social advocacy along the way. We will continue the journal’s mission to expand the empirical and theoretical underpinnings of public interest communications. Now that we have established ourselves as a respectable research-driven journal, thanks to our contributors and the hard work of those listed above, we want to also render this space more inclusive to the communicators, practitioners, and activists our research has long sought to support.

PIC is a growing academic discipline that transcends the institution. Our journal is open-access and interdisciplinary because we believe that everyone should have access to sound research, thought-provoking case studies, and practical campaign strategies to drive sustained social change. Increasingly, there are more spaces where academics can publish for a general audience, but this new iteration of JPIC aims to foster collaboration between academics and practitioners to a greater extent. While our publication has always welcomed practitioners to publish with us, our goal for the next phase of the journal is to encourage more practitioner perspectives and activist participation.

As such, this issue showcases the work of practitioners. We brought back the Practitioner Q & A, first introduced in volume 1, issue 2. In this issue, Maria Bryan of Maria Bryan Creative considers how to incorporate trauma-informed strategies into copywriting work. Bryan also discusses other issues related to cross-cultural communications. This issue also includes the first of our peer-reviewed Practitioner Perspectives (a new series of practitioner case studies) written by Carter Dougherty, Communications Director of Americans for Financial Reform. Dougherty details the strategies utilized by various public-interest groups, including his own, to help Dr. Lisa Cook get confirmed to the Federal Reserve Board of Governors—the first Black woman ever to hold this position. Our final piece is a review by Corinne Futch of the book Prisms of the People: Power & Organizing in Twenty-First-Century America.

We are also excited to announce that, by July 2023, JPIC will be listed in Scopus, Elsevier's abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature. Why are we cheering about this? It is big news for the journal because it means that our content will now be more widely available and searchable on a global scale.

As we nurture and grow JPIC, we are set to bolster our outreach and community-building efforts significantly. We are particularly excited about an upcoming centerpiece of our efforts—a comprehensive, open-access, user-friendly online database of our articles. This new online database will transform the way our readers interact with our content and help you to quickly find the content that best suits your needs.
For each published article, we will provide succinct summaries and key takeaways, carefully simplified for your convenience to help you to grasp the essence of our research articles. A key feature of our database will be an intuitive categorization system: you will be able to navigate and find the research articles and case studies that are most relevant to your industry with ease. Whether you're seeking information on a specific topic, looking to understand a complex communications framework, or simply exploring out of curiosity, our categorized database will be your go-to resource.

In line with our commitment to facilitating collaboration, we will also spotlight partnerships between researchers and practitioners who focus on similar topics. These collaborations aim to unite the rigor of academic research with the practical experience of those on the ground, creating a rich tapestry of insights that can help drive sustained social change. We believe that this database will be a transformative tool, promoting the exchange of ideas and making our research more accessible than ever. Keep an eye out for its launch—we cannot wait to share it with you.

We look forward to publishing a mix of peer-reviewed academic research and practitioner perspectives moving forward. We hope you enjoy this first issue bridging the gap between practitioners and academics. In the coming issues, we seek to include content that represents the full spectrum of everyone who contributes to growing public interest communications as a field.

Lastly, we would like to dedicate this issue to Rakeem Robinson, an incredible budding PIC scholar who passed away October 25, 2022. Rakeem embodied the ideals of PIC; his research focused on minority narratives surrounding mental health in addition to emphasizing the intersectional strategies of the Black Lives Matter movement. Rakeem will be missed as a member of the PIC community, but he will not be forgotten.
I have hope that I will achieve something more valuable than I can comprehend and that I can help someone else grow.

– Rakeem Robinson
In Memoriam: Rakeem Robinson

It is with profound sadness and a deep sense of loss that we remember and honor Rakeem Robinson, a rising star in the field of PIC who left us all too soon. Rakeem embodied the spirit of PIC. His intellectual curiosity, passion for social justice, and relentless pursuit of truth were evident in every aspect of his work. His research, which focused on minority narratives surrounding mental health and the intersectional strategies of the Black Lives Matter movement, broke new ground and shed light on areas of our field that had previously been underexplored.

Rakeem had an innate ability to connect with people, empathize with their experiences, and weave these narratives into his work. He was not just a scholar; he was a storyteller, using his research to give voice to those who had often been unheard. His work was not just about promoting understanding; it was about promoting empathy, compassion, and change.

His passing leaves an irreplaceable void in our community. However, his influence continues to resonate in the work we do. Rakeem was a beacon of hope and inspiration, a powerful reminder of what we, as public interest communicators, can achieve when we strive to make the world a better place. His legacy will continue to motivate and guide us as we move forward.

Rakeem's loss is deeply felt, but he is far from forgotten. His contributions to the field of PIC will continue to inspire scholars, activists, and practitioners alike. His spirit will live on in the research we conduct, in the conversations we have, and in the change we strive to create.

Rakeem Robinson, we remember you not just as an exceptional scholar, but as a compassionate advocate and a cherished member of our community. Your absence is keenly felt, but your impact is indelible. Rest in peace and know that your work continues to inspire and drive us forward.
PRACTITIONER Q&A

AN INCLUSIONARY WAKEUP CALL FOR PUBLIC INTEREST COPYWRITERS

MARIA BRYAN
Biography

Maria Bryan is a nonprofit messaging strategist and trainer. She helps nonprofit leaders tell powerful and impactful stories that minimize harm. Maria has over fifteen years in marketing communications in the public sector. She has a master’s degree in public administration, a bachelor’s degree in journalism, and is professionally certified in trauma and resilience. Maria is a firm believer that storytellers make the world a healthier, safer, cleaner, and happier place.

**Question:** Can you tell us about your background and how you became interested in the intersection of language and communication?

**Answer:** I’d really fallen in love with public service, and I’d found a home in nonprofit communications, so I started out working at a community health center in Chinatown in New York City. This is a good foundation because I’ll probably be talking a lot about this when you ask me about language. I worked in an organization that served mostly Chinese immigrants by providing cultural and language-appropriate health care. I then worked at the largest public health organization serving New Yorkers for a few years and then I had my baby and was ready to get out of the hustle. So, I started my consultancy, Maria Bryan Creative, at the very end of 2018, where I first focused on nonprofit marketing strategy and campaigns and have for the past few years really focused on messaging—nonprofit...
messaging—through one-on-one support and training.

So, much of what I do is training nonprofits in their messaging. I focus on trauma-informed nonprofit marketing and messaging, i.e., how can nonprofit leaders, and especially marketers and communicators, be equipped to integrate trauma-informed best practices while they are gathering and telling stories.

**Question:** I’d love to hear a little bit more about what got you into this rabbit hole of curiosity.

**Answer:** When I was a health educator in Ghana, I worked very closely on women’s issues through training men. There were really innovative programs at the time about training men. I realized that, at least for the tribal language in the community I lived in, there wasn’t a word for rape. It was the first time that I realized the power of language in words. How do you fully talk to a community about something like rape and the nuances of, for example, can you rape your wife? Can you rape your girlfriend? What does rape look like when rape isn’t even part of their vocabulary and language? The weight of language very early on in my career was important, especially for the most vulnerable of us.

As a white woman working in immigrant communities, I quickly realized the importance of understanding the language and cultural context of the communities I was serving. In transitioning to work at an immigrant community health center that prioritized culturally and linguistically appropriate care, I gained an even more empathetic view of the challenges of cross-cultural communication. Specifically, I recognized the ways in which my own privilege and experiences as a white woman could lead me to make assumptions and take the lead on communications, only to find out that my messaging was not effective or even harmful. Through these experiences, I learned the importance of centering the voices and perspectives of the communities I was serving in my communications work.

For example, I’d be writing a blog post or an email about how to get better sleep at night—I would write things such as, “only sleep in your bedroom, don’t work in your bedroom.” We had a system in place where people would review my work and they’d say, “Maria, a lot of these families live in one room, they don’t have the luxury to only sleep in a separate bedroom.” There were so many lessons like this in the first seven years of my career, more in the cross-cultural context of how important language is. I’ll stop there as far as where this curiosity is from, and the power of language, it started as both a health educator in Ghana and working in immigrant communities in New York.

**Question:** Are there any particular strategies that you use from that cross-cultural perspective? For instance, how do you take a strategy that may have worked in Ghana and transfer it to something that would work for the Chinese immigrant population in New York City?

**Answer:** I love that question. In this field, I’m learning that you can’t have a checklist...
sometimes, and you really have to rely on intuition. You really have to give yourself grace and empathy as you’re working toward it.

I just want to start off with that, there is no checklist. I lived in Ghana for two years and was really immersed in the community. It helped to know that humor was helpful for language and health education. In the Chinese community, especially in New York City, there was so much fear, and this is growing post-pandemic. The Asian American community is in fear of a poor health diagnosis, in fear of the government, and in fear of violence. Even having that kind of context is helpful, and I was immersed in it. For five years, I worked in Chinatown and was one of maybe three white people that worked in this very large organization that spanned across two boroughs.

Part of it was time, but in both cases I relied very heavily on the people who lived that experience. Fortunately, I had partners in Ghana who would put me in my place when needed. Something that was really beautiful about Charles B. Wang Community Health Center that really set the tone for the work I do today was this very lengthy review process. It might feel very long and bureaucratic, but now I’ve come to really appreciate it, because I might write the first draft of something, but they’re going to have community members review it first. They’re going to have doctors, actual health educators, who have been in the field working with these patients to review it. I was the health literacy editor in line for other people; I studied journalism and English, and with that background, I came in to make sure that health literacy was at a third or fourth grade reading level. That’s not to say that we didn’t have very smart patients, but things are just easier to read when they’re at a lower literacy level.

That’s what it takes—not relying on yourself, having humility about your life experience and your privilege. Again, very early on in my career, I knew that I was this white person that stuck out and was filled with privilege and I had to constantly check that, because I wasn’t doing fundraising communications. I was directly creating communications for the people that we served.

**Question:** How have you evolved your approach to copywriting over time?

**Answer:** I really transitioned last year into helping nonprofits have a strong messaging strategy to lead all their communications, whether that’s directly for their beneficiaries and clients or fundraising, or advocacy. There is a storytelling framework that I teach, and I teach content development. Last year, I was teaching this framework, and one of my students who worked with LGBTQ+ homeless youth asked, “Where does trauma-informed messaging fit into your framework?” And it kicked me in the stomach. I intuitively tried the best I could to respond. I thought, of course, so many people in this room are working with clients and beneficiaries who have experienced great trauma, and we cannot talk about messaging without talking about trauma. We are asking people to tell what is likely their most painful lived experiences in order to
fundraise, in order to fill our programs. This was a huge change and trajectory for me, where I realized that if I’m going to really focus on messaging, I need to integrate both trauma-informed and ethical storytelling practices.

This is where language is so crucially important because how we talk about our clients informs whether we’re dignifying and respecting them. In the 90s, we saw a lot of Sandy Struthers and these cringeworthy fundraising campaigns where these children literally have no voice, their parents are not in the screen. There are flies all over them, and then a white woman is like, “Come on, folks! Let’s save their lives.” And the thing is—it worked. It raised so much money, but we can do things differently. We can still have a really big impact and we can give the people we serve great agency, and we can bring people in—supporters, people with money—we can bring them into the community in a way that doesn’t position them as saviors and so that’s what trauma-informed and ethical storytelling is all about. It’s these shifts in mindsets as a start.

In any role, workflows and processes are crucial for ensuring tasks are completed efficiently and effectively. When it comes to storytelling, these workflows may involve a range of elements, such as obtaining the correct media consent form, using appropriate language when referring to clients, and a word bank which outlines the nuances of different terms and phrases. For example, there may be important differences between the terms “homeless” and “unhoused” that must be understood and respected when working with people who are experiencing housing insecurity. Similarly, the language around issues such as substance abuse can be complex and nuanced, and may require careful consideration in order to ensure respectful and appropriate communications with clients. Ultimately, having a clear and effective workflow is essential for providing high-quality care and support to those we serve.

I had one client who works in indigenous communities and she said, “we don’t use the phrase ‘mission statement.’” I was like, “Of course you don’t use the word mission statement!” That blew my mind—the word “mission” is a reminder of the colonial missions that were catastrophic for indigenous communities throughout history. We used “purpose statement” instead. When it comes to ethical and trauma-informed storytelling, language is everything. Making sure that we protect what I call our story owners, dignify our story owners, it really is the role of nonprofit communicators and marketers to uphold that and to take that seriously.

**Question:** Within public interest communications we work on storytelling as well as the role of ethics. Research suggests that trauma-informed stories, like suicide narratives, have the potential to lead to pattern behavior. How do you make sure that the stories you’re telling, especially as they relate to trauma, are not causing harm?

**Answer:** Here’s what is so important about the question that you’re asking. It’s not just about protecting the story owner, the person who is telling their story. Your audience is
just as vulnerable to reliving their own trauma, or experiencing secondary trauma. Especially in the nonprofit space, people who are reading your content are drawn to your mission for a reason. It may be because of similar things that they’ve experienced. For example, if you’ve survived sexual violence, you might want to donate your money and time just to organizations that support sexual violence.

This is so huge. It’s not just about the interview process; it’s about writing these stories in a way that protects your audience who reads your content. I feel you can’t skirt around the pain and the problem—we can’t pretend it doesn’t exist, but we don’t need to overtalk about the pain and the gore. We have choices on writing just enough so that we know the problem exists. We set the tone—this is the problem; this is the pain. Then we can go into the transformation, and if the goal is to not shock people, but to inspire hope and empathy, then we’re closer to doing justice for audiences to make sure we’re not retraumatizing them.

Again, I want to underscore that we have choices in how much of the pain of the story we share. You don’t have to go into detail. One story that I often share when I’m training people is that I have a client who is spearheading bereavement advocacy. She is ensuring that there is more holistic legislation in support of people who have lost loved ones and she has her own story of losing her five-month-old daughter. When I talked to her about her story, she said, “before I go any further, I’m not going to tell you anything about my daughter. I’m not going to tell you what her diagnosis was. I’m not going to tell you about the moment she died.” She clearly set those boundaries. She said, “I will tell you as much as you want about my story, but you don’t need to know about my daughter.” She said it was such ferocity that I know that she has had so many journalists asking about the gory details of her daughter’s diagnosis and how her daughter died. She could tell her story very impactfully and really portrayed her own pain and experience in a way to get your attention without going into the gory details. I think of that story often, how we can set boundaries on what we need to share in the story and what is not relevant.

**Question:** With this example, she was very clear with her boundaries, but sometimes folks don’t know how to communicate boundaries so clearly. What are signs you look for to make sure your audiences are comfortable with what and how you are communicating?

**Answer:** In an interview process, the most trauma-informed best practice is, before every question, continue to give them that permission, control, and autonomy. For example, “You don’t have to answer this question. You can answer as much or as little as you’re comfortable sharing.”

Because you’re right—she set those boundaries. I didn’t. Now, during that interview, I did make sure that we were pausing for breaks because she was telling a very painful story. That is on us, the interviewers, to constantly be reminding the story owners that they have a choice in how much they’re sharing. They also might feel very cozy and comfortable in the interview.
process if you’re doing it right. So, they also need to know that they can retract that story at any time. They might see it in the wild and realize, actually, I don’t really want that much of my story out there.

So again, it’s not so much a checklist. I think it’s good to have principles and guidelines on putting the story owner first or prioritizing transformation, hope, and inspiration instead of the shock factor. Again, you’re going to have to rely on practice and intuition—and you’re just going to fail a couple of times. And then you’ll keep going, because it’s important to you.

**Question:** One of the things that I’ve learned by following your work is the importance of listening and taking inventory of our audiences’ preferred language. You mentioned word banks earlier, but are there any other tools that you use to adjust for your audiences’ linguistic preferences?

**Answer:** When you’re just starting out, look at testimonials or interviews. As a marketer or communicator, you want things to be as academic and eloquent as possible, but if you really look at what your key audience is saying, they’re saying it without editing themselves. The best way to use language that resonates with people is to use language they’re also using. I know for my own marketing, whenever I am launching a project, I’ll do a pilot where I do it for free or very low cost, and I’ll say, I’d appreciate if you could review this and give a testimonial. Then I’ll take that testimony directly as the copy that I use for the sales page.

This also works in fundraising because it’s easy for us to assume why people give. In the nonprofit context, it’s easy to assume why people show up at our doors and use our services. Again, from a general marketing perspective, we assume why people want our services, but if we actually ask them, we can learn so much more. Early on in my consultancy, I taught about audience personas, and if you’re just sitting there coming up with what you think the audience persona is, you’re actually vulnerable to your own biases—but if you do take the time and space to actually have conversations with your most ideal audience, you’ll be able not only to have a much deeper understanding of their wants and challenges and needs, but also to hear the language they use.

Early on in my career, I had the opportunity to work in a community that spoke a tribal language that was very different from English. This experience taught me the importance of humility in communications and the need to understand the language and cultural context of the communities I was serving. Later, working in a Chinese community in New York City further emphasized this lesson. I realized that I couldn’t assume that people would automatically understand what I was saying, whether it was due to cultural differences, language barriers, or any other factors. This is a lesson that I carry with me today, even when working with clients who may share some of my own experiences and backgrounds. I believe that centering the perspectives and voices of those we are communicating with is essential to effective and inclusive communications.
**Question:** Based on your experiences over the past fifteen years, do you have any advice for communicators who are starting this journey themselves, or who may be struggling to connect with their audiences through language?

**Answer:** It has been a range of different experiences. It is funny how cyclical things get when I talk about going back to lessons I learned early on in my career, they’ve been popping back up.

My biggest advice is slow down your process. You don’t need to be banging out social media every day, email every day. You don’t need to be gathering 20-50 stories a year. It isn’t even that consistency is key—what’s truly key is resonating with your audience, or being known for something you’re positioning—no matter who you’re marketing for, whether you’re a nonprofit, for-profit, a consultant.

If you slow down the process and you have a deep understanding of your audience, if you’re telling a good story that’s ethical and trauma-informed, it means you might only have two to three stories to tell for that year. At the end of the day, you have a website that will resonate with your audience. You have email and social media to which people will be nodding their heads. You’re building that trust in a very deep way. My hope for marketers is that they have leadership that gives them that space and that they give themselves that space. They don’t need to bang out as much content as possible to reach their goals. They just need to do it well.

When I was working in the nonprofit space, I put pressure on myself to be on top of everything, to create two nonprofit stories and feature two clients every month. There was no room for anything! Less is more—do it slower, give yourself space, and you’ll start to see movement in your goals and initiatives.

**Question:** What barriers have you faced regarding the use of language that is more prone to getting lost in translation? For example, in the Chinese context, there’s the notion of guanxi, which is difficult to translate in a Western context.

**Answer:** This is another example where slowing down comes in. Sometimes it just takes a bit more effort and a few more conversations. In terms of the cultural context, make sure that you’re getting input from people—does this sound right to you? Is this resonating? Is this what I’m trying to say? Leave room to rewrite things—and I’m coming from a public health context, so it’s important that we’re getting the right message across because we want our audience to be the healthiest version of themselves. I want to take it a step further and say that a big part of this conversation is that language changes so much. What was acceptable yesterday may not be acceptable today. We might be able to reclaim that word, that language too, which is beautiful. I love when that happens.

So, how do we ride that wave as marketers and as communicators? What I particularly find to be tricky—and maybe even harmful—is when people become frustrated with language and want to completely
change it to something that others aren’t going to even understand. For example, “DEI” has been so watered down, so when do we say, we’re not going to say DEI anymore, instead we’re going to come up with something else that has more weight to it, I’m all for that.

“Ally,” the word “ally”—I’ve heard people feel very strongly that they don’t want to use the word “ally” anymore because it’s lost its meaning. For a word like “ally” that is so well known, it is going to take a huge movement to get people to start using a different word in its place. I think that there’s going to have to be patience when you get frustrated with language, and it starts to feel watered down, and it doesn’t resonate anymore.

Another great example in my industry is “thought leadership,” which can make people gag. People hate talking about “thought leadership,” but what can you do? We all know what it means. We can come up with all these cute ways to say it in a way that might be more meaningful, but sometimes you have to use the language that people know and understand. You can also leave space to say, “Hey, this is what we have, but this is imperfect.”

As part of my services, I often help people craft their organizational purpose statement. However, I’ve come to realize that the term “mission statement” can be problematic and even offensive in certain indigenous communities. Therefore, I strive to honor and respect the language and traditions of the communities I work with by using terminology that is more appropriate and respectful. At the same time, I recognize that clear and effective communication often requires using language that is familiar and understandable to those we are communicating with. It’s important to strike a balance between honoring cultural and linguistic differences and ensuring that our messages are accessible and meaningful to our audiences.

**Question:** How do you stay informed and up-to-date with these trends in language and preferences?

**Answer:** My clients—they know their industry so well. I find time and time again that I’ll have a client and I’ll be working on their messaging. I can try to do a bit of research, but the second I’m in the room with them, they know. They know the newest and most nuanced, appropriate way to talk about their clients and their industry. After every client meeting, my vocabulary grows. Thinking back to my client who lost her daughter, I thought, do we talk about “bereavement,” or do we talk about “grief,” because everyone knows the word grief. She made sure I understood that grief is part of the bereavement process, but it doesn’t capture the financial burdens, for example. I have learned to put my assumptions at the door when I’m with my clients because they know best—and then I’m just getting them in the room so we can get it on paper to agree on these things. There are resources and they do change, but people know in their industry what the language is and what the complexities and the nuances are.
Question: When you bring your clients in to talk, how do you facilitate that conversation with them? Do you have specific questions to ask when you’re uncertain how to phrase something?

Answer: When I bring clients in to talk about messaging, I try to create a diverse group of people in the room, including founders, new employees, community members, and others. This mix of voices and experiences helps us answer questions in different ways and ensures that everyone has a stake in the conversation.

Before we even get to messaging, we spend a lot of time discussing questions like:

1. What is the problem that we’re solving?
2. What are the systemic issues at play?
3. What are the nuances and interrelated factors involved?

Then, we dig deep into the client’s unique solution. For example, I ask a lot of questions about the client’s story arc, the beneficiary’s story arc, and their positioning in the industry. We discuss questions like:

1. Why do you see your solution as different from other organizations, and why is it important to do things differently?
2. What is your role in making the industry better?

We also explore the more daring goals they may have, which helps us clarify the vision for both their organization and their greater industry. Finally, we talk about empathy and what makes the client’s lived experiences credible to support the people they serve. These are the kinds of questions we ruminate on and discuss at length, and through these conversations, we develop word banks and messaging strategies that accurately and effectively convey the client’s mission and values. As the facilitator, my role is to guide the conversation and ensure that everyone has a chance to contribute their thoughts and ideas.

Question: Looking ahead, what are the biggest challenges that you think copywriters are going to face in the next few years? How do you plan to address them?

Answer: I hate to give the same answer, but I think it’s this pressure to create as much content as possible, to be in this hamster wheel of content creation. There’s burnout that comes with that—the creative burnout, the emotional burnout, mental, physical—of all the burnout that comes with creating as much content as possible. We must give ourselves permission to slow down and to trust that our audience is still going to act even if we might not be producing as much content as we think we need to be producing. I combat it through practice and modeling. I’ve transitioned how I create content and how much content I create and I have data to show that people are acting more on relevant content than on just constant content. Trauma-informed content is not new—and it’s actually going to become the norm, which I think is going to be scary for copywriters because it’s one more thing that they have to do—to make sure that their content is trauma-informed. This is the direction that we’re going. Embrace it. It’s possible, and as it becomes a
practice It’ll become easier to do things with a trauma-informed, ethical lens.

**Question:** PIC is about adapting and sustaining messaging strategies. You’ve talked a lot about adaptability and how the field has approached these new trends. How do you adapt your messages and campaigns to account for this goal of long-term impact? Especially with the goal of slowing down, how can we ensure that these messages sustain themselves?

**Answer:** We can rely on automation and tools. We can see what’s working and get them on repeat. We can repurpose content that works well instead of reinventing the wheel—take powerful messaging and repurpose it. Your audience today and your audience three years ago are likely different—they’ve likely moved on. Whatever you wrote three years ago that was working, you can reuse that. I give you permission to use that content again.

From an ethical and trauma standpoint, I’m rewriting my content all the time. There are a few trends and tactics that I do and that we could all do. For example, don’t overpromise transformations. In copywriting, we talk about the necessity of transformation. Instead of saying, ‘take my course and this is how your life is going to be different,’ I could say, ‘students that have taken my course have often had these kinds of results.’ We can be clear on what to expect in terms of transformation.

Urgency—don’t create false urgency in your writing or whatever you’re offering to your audience. If there is real urgency and doors are going to close, then let that be real. If not, people will become frustrated if you create urgency and then they see the same offer again a week later. It is important to build ethical trust by avoiding fake urgency. I took advantage of all the best practices in copywriting, and now that I’m getting trained in ethical and trauma-informed messaging, I frequently go back to my sales pages and make these tactical tweaks.

**Question:** Our last question for you—where can our audience go to learn more about you and your work and stay up to date on your latest projects?

**Answer:** MariaBryan.com is where you can learn more about my work. I would love to connect on LinkedIn, so you can find me—Maria Bryan.

**References**


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1 The concept of social privilege is based on the contextual power inherent to one’s identity or demographics including, for example, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, economic status, age, education, and degree of ability (e.g., Black & Stone, 2005).

2 Ethical storytelling involves a set of practices enabling communicators to more effectively, respectfully, and responsibly convey others’ stories (e.g., Meretoja, 2018).

3 Shocking audiences with too much detail is a form of fear appeal, a tactic shown to have weaker and even adverse impacts in social marketing campaigns (Hastings, Stead, & Webb, 2004).

4 Certain emotions move audiences to action in unique ways, and eliciting positive emotion tends to lead to more positive outcomes. For instance, Rudd, Vohs, and Aaker (2012) found that people who experienced awe were more likely to spend time volunteering and to feel more satisfied with their lives.

5 The concept of guanxi is important within Chinese culture, denoting a strong interpersonal relationship including trust and moral obligation. For more on guanxi, see Chen and Chen (2004).

6 Diversity, equity, and inclusion have become buzzwords across academic and corporate spaces alike, but discussion around these topics does not always lead to action. Lauding diversity and equity without substantiating these concepts with inclusive practice can lead to performative allyship (e.g., McKellar, 2021) and tokenism (e.g., Jackson, Thoits, & Taylor, 1995; Oh, 2021).
Based on her qualifications alone—both education and experience—Dr. Lisa Cook merited a quick and easy confirmation as a nominee of President Joseph Biden to the Federal Reserve Board of Governors. A professor at Michigan State University who, in addition to her academic research, had been a White House staffer and overseer within the Federal Reserve’s system of regional banks already, Dr. Cook could hardly have possessed better credentials for the governing body of the nation’s central bank.
Dougherty, Confirming Dr. Lisa Cook to the Fed, *JPIC*, Vol. 7 (2023)

From a public-interest perspective, Cook represented an important step forward for the Fed. Thanks to her own research, she was in the position to advance the Fed’s incipient effort to understand the role of race in the U.S. economy. In time, she might provide a push to policy ideas that would help the Fed to craft policies to address the racial inequities that pervade the U.S. economy.

But as the first Black woman selected to join the Fed board, Dr. Cook had every reason to expect a challenging confirmation process at the hands of Republican senators who, with a track record of throwing sharp, disingenuous jabs at nominees of color (Linskey, 2021), would participate in the Senate debate over her confirmation. Seldom does a person of color, particularly a woman, escape such a process in the current political environment without having to brave this kind of treatment.

The U.S. Senate did eventually approve on May 10, 2022—by the narrowest possible margin of 51-50—the nomination of Dr. Cook. She now sits on the board of the Fed as it grapples with inflation, a possible recession, and stresses in the financial system.

While nothing can take the place of the right nominee, that outcome reflected, in part, a strategy designed by a coalition of nonpartisan groups who all shared an interest in policies designed to make the economy, and the financial system in particular, more just and stable. They laid in a strategy to set the right public tone both before and after Dr. Cook’s nomination to the Fed on January 14, 2022. The groups saw the challenge coming, prepared for it, anticipated what the opponents would do, and worked strategically to push positive messages while deflecting or ignoring a disinformation campaign on social media.

What follows is an assessment of the communications strategy and tactics employed to support Dr. Cook’s confirmation—and ultimately achieve economic and financial policies built around equity and stability. This case study will focus on the communications aspects of Dr. Cook’s nomination that bear on the challenges when the person in question is a Black woman, focusing on nonstandard media and public relations tactics that might be adapted in other public interest efforts.

Adopting a clear strategy and sticking to it proved successful, as did the fortitude to avoid certain standard but resource-intensive tactics and to instead brainstorm new ideas. Countering disinformation with reframing and refusing to dwell on opponents’ falsehoods and lies may have been the most useful tactic. Direct rebuttals of baseless or racist attacks ran the risk of being resource-intensive without necessarily achieving the goal, unless in the service of rebutting a figure who embodied the opposition narrative about Dr. Cook in the Senate. Also, choosing the right validators—in this case, prominent and experienced white men who lent the privilege and prestige they enjoyed—proved useful.¹

Overall, the communications strategy revolved around the fact that there was far more to the first Black woman nominee to the Fed than what she represented symbolically, namely her

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¹ Dr. Cook was nominated to complete a term on the Board of Governors that expires on January 31, 2024. President Biden then re-nominated her to a full 14-year term on May 12, 2023.
experience and expertise. The organizations advocated for Dr. Cook in ways that had nothing to do with skin color.

The focus in this case study will be resolutely on the outside game, and the influence public interest organizations could bring to bear in the public debate around Dr. Cook’s nomination. This article is not an explanation of communications work in the White House or the Senate. The public interest groups who led this coalition are nonpartisan issue advocates who pressure Democrats and Republicans alike. The groups necessarily stayed in contact with key Senate offices and Biden administration officials but they executed their own independent strategy. The organizations looked out for Dr. Cook and all that she promised to do to shift the economy in an equitable direction—not the political fortunes of the White House.

The public interest coalition

The public interest community created a large coalition organized chiefly, but not entirely, around the staffs of Americans for Financial Reform, Public Citizen, and the Action Center on Race and the Economy (ACRE).

Eventually, 97 groups, including labor unions, consumer advocates, environmental activists, and grassroots organizations would endorse Dr. Cook’s nomination, and each played some role in winning over the Senate (Americans for Financial Reform, 2022). Also, Dr. Cook began the fight with her own set of high-level relationships at racial justice groups that spoke out strongly in support of her (Clunie et al., 2022).

Like other public interest coalitions, a measure of cheerful chaos and last-minute scrambling provided the theme music for the daily toil, but in the main, regular convenings and check-ins left the campaign feeling, to all those involved, relatively organized amid a broad dispersion of responsibility. It was truly a group effort.

Among the participating organizations, the moral imperative of ensuring that powerful governing bodies in the U.S. government included diverse viewpoints, and that a Black woman at the Fed was long overdue, required little emphasis. But other factors heightened the importance of Dr. Cook’s nomination.

First, Senator Elizabeth Warren has of late been the most prominent lawmaker to embrace the slogan—grounded in fact—that “personnel is policy” (Warmbrodt, 2021, para. 3), and the sentiment holds true; good outcomes depend on good appointees at agencies with immense influence. Second, a mere board member today often becomes a more senior policymaker in future administrations; the current chair, Jerome Powell, was previously a board member, as was the vice-chair, Lael Brainard. Finally, the Fed itself is on a long-delayed journey regarding the role of race in the U.S. economy. Over the past decade, it has deepened research into the causes

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2 Dr. Cook and Dr. Philip Jefferson, nominated alongside her, were only the fourth and fifth Black individuals ever to join the board. The Federal Reserve System, composed of the board and the regional banks, shows a “staggering homogeneity” (Conti-Brown & Nygaard, 2021, para. 1).
of Black unemployment, held conferences on the racialized impacts of policy choices, and founded institutions devoted to understanding the role of race in economics (Boesler et al., 2021). Dr. Cook, both in her person and her own research, would surely be an immense asset to the Fed’s work.

But first, the Senate had to confirm her.

The nature of racist attacks

A study published by the progressive advocacy group Accountable.US (Accountable.US, 2022) after Dr. Cook’s confirmation validated what people working with the coalition knew intuitively—and what they prepared for—before the Senate process got underway: Republicans would mount more vicious and numerous attacks on Democratic nominees of color than when considering similar nominations of white people.

The study traced the radicalization of Republican attitudes toward Democratic nominees, most notably the decision of the Republican leader, Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, not to even consider President Barack Obama’s nomination of Merrick Garland to the U.S. Supreme Court in 2016. Then after Biden took office in 2021, Republican senators exhibited a pattern recognizable to any objective observer. According to Accountable.US (2022), “One of the more disturbing trends that has emerged during this new era of Republican obstructionism is that many of the most dishonest and caustic attacks on Democratic nominees have been reserved for women and people of color” (para. 11).

In this instance, as in many others, political realities do not let anyone ignore the role of race—in nominations or anything else—so simply disregarding it was unrealistic. However, it is essential to note that responding to racialized attacks did not always mean highlighting race or gender. The coalition devised a strategy and set of tactics aimed at Dr. Cook’s successful confirmation. The public interest lay in achieving that goal, not making a point.

The makeup of the Senate meant that the strategy for getting to 51 votes on Dr. Cook’s confirmation resembled other efforts in which Republicans were more likely than not to lock arms in opposition. All Democrats, starting with the Senate Banking Committee, which would have to report out the nomination, would have to support her. Democrats who had carved out reputations for throwing in their lots with Republicans, notably Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia, could be trouble. Additionally, Vice President Kamala Harris was required to cast the decisive 51st vote, as the Senate was evenly split until early 2023.

Dr. Cook’s nomination came alongside two others to the Fed board, Philip Jefferson for another board spot and Sarah Bloom Raskin as the vice chair for supervision. At the same time, Biden renominated Powell to a second term as chair, and proposed to elevate Brainard from board member to vice chair (The White House, 2022). In short, efforts on behalf of Dr. Cook were embedded in a larger fight.

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3 About a year later, Brainard would leave the Fed to become director of the National Economic Council.
Campaign tactics

Work began by hashing out a basic document that outlined Dr. Cook’s experience and expertise, emphasizing those elements that could become talking points, op-eds, or reporter memos. From those written products flowed the blocking and tackling of communications work: sending materials to reporters, steering them toward people who would speak helpfully about the nominee, and organizing output in various media that reflected key messages about her experience and expertise. These activities continued throughout the process, from nomination to confirmation.

The coalition extemporized specific tactics, acknowledging that race would play a role in the inevitable attacks on Dr. Cook, though the response would be to double down on her credentials. Again, the choice fell on the tactics most likely to work, not necessarily ones that emphasized race. Organizations did not prioritize seeing themselves quoted in the media. We were much more likely to feed information, data, and talking points to people—former government officials, academics, associates of Dr. Cook—who were credible validators.

Hugging Powell

A central tactic involved associating Dr. Cook as closely as possible with Powell, the Fed chair. Appointed by Trump, Powell had assiduously courted Democratic lawmakers before his renomination by Biden and seemed a sure bet for confirmation. Many public interest organizations involved had not supported Powell’s renomination, so this tactic—dubbed ‘hug Powell’ by a tart-tongued Senate staffer—was not without reservations. However, this approach aligned with a parliamentary strategy of moving all the nominations through the process simultaneously so that lawmakers who wanted Powell to stay in the chair (he would later be reconfirmed by an 80-19 vote) would have to block him too if they wanted to bar the way for Dr. Cook.

The primary focus of the Federal Reserve is monetary policy, built around a dual mandate of stabilizing prices and maximizing employment. During her confirmation hearing, Dr. Cook expressed agreement with the Fed’s current policy direction of raising interest rates. The trickier part, from a communications perspective, was framing her academic work, which was more expansive than monetary policy, in a manner consistent with how the Fed operates. Given the common perception that Fed’s responsibilities are limited to monetary policy—i.e., lower or raise interest rates—harmonizing this portrait of her expertise with the Fed’s overall role was important.

Dr. Cook’s academic research

Apart from being a central bank, the Fed is also a massive research institution that produces countless studies, both in Washington at the Federal Reserve Board, and at the 12 regional
reserve banks. It seeks, quite reasonably, to understand the economy it is charged with steering, and understand where received wisdom might not be accurate or useful.

As noted, in the years before Dr. Cook’s nomination, the Fed had already set itself on the path of understanding more about how race factors into macroeconomic performance. One standout piece of research Dr. Cook published was a paper about how violence against Black people in the United States reduced innovation in economic activity, a subject that Nobel laureate Milton Friedman—an icon among free-market Republicans—encouraged her to explore (Garcia & Smith, 2020).

Viewed in this light, advocates could portray Dr. Cook’s nomination as not only a natural progression of the Fed's ongoing efforts, but also a valuable expansion of its capabilities. In addition to her prior experience with the Fed and the executive branch, Dr. Cook’s appointment brought fresh perspectives, informed by her highly original research, to an institution that had already begun to question its own long-held assumptions. Briefing materials for media and Senate staff as well as outside validators constantly highlighted this point, which came to light in statements to the media like this one in Bloomberg News:

“Lisa Cook is not going to come to the Fed with rigid views about how the economy works,” says Andrew Levin, a Dartmouth College economist and former adviser to Janet Yellen, the former Fed chair and current Treasury secretary. “Throughout her career, Cook has been active in identifying the limitations of standard macroeconomic models.” (Torres & Flatley, 2022, para. 16)

Midwestern roots

Effort went into emphasizing Dr. Cook’s roots in the Midwest. One form of anti-elitist criticism of the Fed truly crosses partisan lines. Multiple Fed governors have backgrounds on Wall Street or are simply very wealthy (Gandel, 2017). And conservatives have been known to complain that the Fed is out of touch, in some vague cultural sense, with everyday citizens, and that the federal government often ignores the heartland. It was common ground on which to build public interest messages.

The nomination of Dr. Cook won support from the president of Michigan State University, where Dr. Cook previously taught (Ward, 2022). Detroit Free Press covered her nomination in detail as a running political story from nomination to hearing to confirmation and published a column decrying her treatment at the hands of Republicans (Spangler, 2022a, 2022b; Tompor, 2022a). Now a Fed governor, Dr. Cook merits coverage that clearly evinces a measure of local pride of ownership in her achievements (Tompor, 2022b).
Parrying right-wing attacks

Opponents of Dr. Cook’s nomination, including elected Republicans, former officials, conservative academics, and right-wing journalists, launched vitriolic attacks that were not preventable. These attacks started from the premise that Dr. Cook’s selection was “a purely race-based” choice, in the words of a former Trump administration official (Terkel, 2022, para. 6). And they unfolded the baseless charges from there: she’s not qualified, her research was irrelevant to the Fed’s work, or her experience was overrated.4

These attacks unfolded almost entirely within a media ecosystem of blogs and a few right-wing publications, where social media was the primary channel for circulating these opinions. Twitter, in its pre-Elon Musk incarnation, was the primary platform the critics of Dr. Cook used, presumably since there are enough mainstream voices on the platform that critics hoped to vault their message out of the right-wing echo chambers.

No troll-feeding

Coalition tactics revolved around arresting that process. The first decision was ironclad: do not feed the trolls. There was no upside to doing so. Social media, technologically speaking, raises the profile of controversies, so the less said, the better (e.g., Albright, 2019). The groups would never change the critics’ minds. This decision was not controversial, but it did weigh on some people in our coalition; one person of color told me it was hard to watch the attacks and do nothing, a feeling that it behooved white colleagues to take to heart.

But the groups stood by it. In one case, a friend of Dr. Cook’s, who works at a major think tank, had to be persuaded to retract a news release outlining and rebutting the attacks against the nominee. The friend of Dr. Cook’s eventually appreciated the dangers: that if she called out a key instigator and rebutted him in a news release—with hyperlinks, no less—she would provide all the data points needed for a reporter to take this spat into the mainstream media. If right-wing attacks didn’t get wider traction, there was absolutely no reason to rebut instigators by name.

The counter-campaign: White Dudes Step Up

The coalition adopted a counter-campaign strategy, dubbed “White Dudes Step Up,” to respond to the right-wing trolls, without acknowledging them. One lesson of racial equity in the workplace, something many organizations in the coalition had examined in detail, is the concept of lending the advantages of privilege to those not born with it. So, public interest groups operationalized this idea for an era of social media, in the context of a nomination battle to prevent the trolls from leaping into the mainstream. The weekend after the Senate confirmation

4 Dr. Cook has a PhD in economics and has published extensively. The Trump-appointed chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, Jerome Powell, has neither a PhD in economics, nor a record of professional publication.
battle got underway, prominent white men were asked to speak out on Dr. Cook's qualifications. Many of these men responded enthusiastically, and appreciated what we were doing. The men who spoke out via Twitter included Austan Goolsbee (see Figure 1), Glenn Hubbard, and Joseph Stiglitz.⁵

Figure 1

Tweet by Austan Goolsbee

I support all President Biden's Fed nominees. They need to be confirmed right away.

And @drlisadcook, with her experience on international issues from her time at the CEA and grappling with the euro crisis, will be an important addition to the board. She is a great addition.

4:13 PM · Jan 24, 2022

Note: Among other notable names, Austan Goolsbee, the former head of the White House Council of Economic Advisers, now president of the Chicago Federal Reserve Bank, tweeted in support of Dr. Lisa Cook as part of the White Dudes Step Up counter-campaign strategy (Goolsbee, 2022).

Their messages did not repeat the charges of the trolls by referencing the critics or any other defamatory content. They simply stressed Dr. Cook’s qualifications and called for quick Senate approval. On Monday morning, the collected tweets were sent, in the form of a memo, to reporters covering the nomination.

The sole exception to the no-troll-feeding rule was made for Republican senators who echoed the sentiment that arose on the right-wing, notably for Senator Pat Toomey, the then-ranking Republican on the Senate Banking Committee. Toomey kicked off his opposition to Dr. Cook—he would fight her to the end—by promising to examine whether she had the qualifications to serve at the Fed, a statement that clearly insinuated the answer was negative. The coalition punched back immediately.

Main Republican opponent

Americans for Financial Reform and Public Citizen had hired a public relations firm, Battle Born Collective, that had good relationships with reporters covering Congress. Their principal Adam

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⁵ Austan Goolsbee, formerly chair of the Council of Economic Advisers in the Obama White House, is now the president of the Chicago Federal Reserve Bank. Glenn Hubbard was the chair under George W. Bush. Joseph Stiglitz, a Columbia University professor, is a Nobel laureate in economics.
Jentleson, now chief of staff to Senator John Fetterman (D-PA), was a prominent commentator on the Senate. Jentleson composed the memo with the unsubtle title, “Toomey has a credibility problem on Federal Reserve nominees,” and sent it to journalists. The memo pointed out that Toomey supported the nomination of two (white) Trump picks, Stephen Moore and Judy Shelton, both cartoonishly unqualified for the Fed. Having been TV personalities who appealed to a president who preferred right-wing political entertainment to intellectual engagement, the Moore/Shelton choices had been outlandish enough that even reporters joked about them. In short, that pre-existing frame indicted Toomey’s credibility.

After assailing Dr. Cook’s qualifications, Toomey would later make a broader critique aligned with current Republican opposition to ‘woke capitalism,’ a reactionary trend incorporating racially charged grievance politics into a pseudointellectual critique of how modern corporations might operate around rules touching on environmental, racial, or social issues (e.g., Doescher, 2021). Consistent with that critique, Toomey vocally opposed Dr. Cook because she would bring a racial sensibility to the Fed, though the Fed had been making such inclusionary efforts for nearly a decade prior.

Senate dynamics

The confirmation battle unfolded unexpectedly in one respect. Bloom Raskin, the nominee as vice chair for supervision, turned out to be a greater public flashpoint than Dr. Cook after unsubstantiated Republican allegations of ethical lapses (Eisen, 2022). At one point, they boycotted committee business, depriving it of a quorum and Democrats of their ability to even use their majority. Manchin, a friend of the fossil fuels industry (e.g., Friedman, 2023), torpedoed Bloom Raskin’s nomination in the end. So, Dr. Cook’s name appeared far less in the debate than anticipated when Biden announced the nominations.

Politically, the package of nominations affected the dynamics of the debate in several ways that worked to Dr. Cook’s benefit. Having stopped Bloom Raskin’s nomination, Republicans probably felt less inclined to invest energy in stopping another nominee. And Manchin, having burnished his credentials as an independent-minded lawmaker by deep-sixing Bloom Raskin, probably saw no political upside to defying the White House on another Fed nominee. Dr. Cook’s presence in this package of nominees also probably drew a lot of coded racist criticism that might otherwise have been directed at Jefferson, who is also Black.

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6 The memo “Toomey has a credibility problem on Federal Reserve nominees,” dated January 22, 2022, is available upon request from the author, courtesy of Battle Born Collective.
Toomey invested much time and energy in rounding up all the Republicans to oppose Jefferson for the Senate floor vote on May 10, 2022. The media environment was suffused with irksome but not game-changing ‘Republicans say’ stories that parroted half-truths and lies. The Associated Press published:

Senate Republicans argued that she is unqualified for the position, saying she doesn't have sufficient experience with interest rate policy. They also said her testimony before the Senate Banking Committee suggested she wasn't sufficiently committed to fighting inflation, which is running at four-decade highs. (Rugaber, 2022, para. 3)  

However, by the time Toomey made these arguments, enough Democratic senators had become both inured to the Republican talking points and aware of Toomey’s penchant for selectively targeting nominees that their votes were secure. With Vice President Harris presiding over the Senate to cast the 51st vote, Dr. Cook was confirmed on May 10, 2022.

Evaluating the public interest coalition’s contribution

It is important to acknowledge that while the coalition’s media and communications efforts may not have been the sole factor in Dr. Cook’s confirmation to the Fed, they did have one notable impact.

The coalition supporting Dr. Cook supported preventing the right-wing attacks from becoming part of the mainstream narrative, despite intensive efforts by Republican Senate staff—which the coalition learned about only after Dr. Cook’s confirmation—to push these attacks into the mainstream via the same reporters the coalition reached out to first. This success highlights the importance of strategic communications efforts in public interest communications campaigns.

Generalizing lessons

A few generalized lessons can be drawn from the experience of confirming Dr. Cook, as outlined below.

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7 The point The Associated Press repeats about inflation is incorrect. In her confirmation hearing, Dr. Cook articulated the same position on inflation that the Fed itself, led by Powell, had already adopted. Indeed, on the Fed board she has voted with Powell on interest rate hikes designed to contain inflation.
Finding an opposing figure

Finding an opposing figure helped pin down the borderline racist treatment meted out to Dr. Cook. Senator Toomey’s opposition to Dr. Cook on the grounds of experience and qualifications proved laughable, based on his prior record of supporting two white candidates for the Fed. Drawing these distinctions helped smoke out treatment of the nominee that was, on the surface, neutral—but had racial overtones.

Containing trolls

Containing trolls in public interest communications efforts is possible, but it requires discipline because social media allows disinformation to spread quickly and fringe ideas to penetrate the mainstream. Instead of engaging with trolls, the coalition supporting Dr. Cook focused on leading the conversation on its own terms by repeating positive messages and pushing its own narrative. It’s a common tactic to reframe a conversation.

Choosing validators wisely

Choosing validators wisely is essential in any public interest communications effort, but how they work effectively is a constantly evolving tactic. In the past, the validators in our White Dudes Step Up strategy would have written op-eds or given interviews. In this effort, we bypassed those traditional outlets in favor of social media so that we could, on a quick timetable, put their views in front of reporters covering the nomination. The public interest coalition did not expend a lot of energy trying to flood social media with positive messages. Instead, efforts targeted media with the goal of preventing trolls from reaching the mainstream.

Using resources strategically

Using resources strategically is imperative to public interest communications. Opposition to most public interest priorities are funded by monied interests with significant budgets at their disposal. Developing tactics so that the coalition could prevent right-wing attacks from finding their way into the mainstream media was, at root, a question of resources. If those attacks had gone mainstream, pushing back would have been far more resource-intensive.

Conclusion

The coalition supporting Dr. Cook did not invest heavily in pitching Black-oriented media since our problem lay not with the (largely Black) readership of such media, but rather with white senators. The lack of coverage was disappointing, since Dr. Cook’s compelling personal
biography presented her as a role model for future Black academics and economists, even if not directly related to her confirmation.

However, the idea that the Federal Reserve does not loom large as a relevant subject for Black media is a mindset that is misguided, or at least incomplete. Coretta Scott King, after her husband’s murder in 1968, devoted her life to economic justice issues (Stein, 2016). She stood behind President Jimmy Carter in 1978 when he signed into law the statute governing the Fed; its mandate, a balance of fighting inflation and promoting full employment, was in part her accomplishment. The civil rights movement has always been a pillar of economic justice advocacy (Baker et al., 2017).

By contrast, the subsequent nomination of Ketanji Brown Jackson as the first Black woman on the Supreme Court, about six weeks after the Fed selections, received significant coverage in Black media and elsewhere. The through-line between the nomination of these two Black women—now Governor Cook and Justice Jackson—was not lost on commentators in hindsight (Haines, 2022). In a world where Black women are nominated to high positions, communicators working in the public interest must be prepared.

Contributor biography

Dougherty is the communications director at Americans for Financial Reform, a coalition of civil rights groups, labor unions, consumer advocates, small businesses, and community activists working to make the financial system more inclusive, just, and stable. Founded in 2009 to fight for the legislation after the global financial crisis that became the Dodd-Frank law of 2010, Americans for Financial Reform now works on a variety of issues related to the financial system. Before Americans for Financial Reform, Dougherty was a journalist for 20 years, writing for publications including The Economist, The New York Times, and Bloomberg News. He has reported from Europe, Asia, and Africa, as well as from around the United States.

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I was grateful to work closely on the confirmation campaign with Vasudha Desikan, then the policy director at the Action Center on Race and the Economy (now with the Center for Responsible Lending) and David Arkush, the director for climate policy at Public Citizen. Both offered useful feedback on a draft of this article. Vasudha, more than most, drove the campaign to persuade Biden to nominate Dr. Cook. Ashley Woolheater, a seasoned communications specialist who worked on the confirmation campaign, gave extremely valuable input, as did Tracey Lewis, policy counsel at Public Citizen.
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BOOK REVIEW

PRISMS OF THE PEOPLE: POWER & ORGANIZING IN TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY AMERICA

HAHRIE HAN, ELIZABETH MCKENNA, AND MICHELLE OYAKAWA
**Book Review:** *Prisms of the People: Power & Organizing in Twenty-First-Century America*

By Hahrie Han, Elizabeth McKenna, and Michelle Oyakawa

Johns Hopkins University, Harvard Kennedy School, Muskingum University

Reviewed by Corinne Futch, University of Florida


*Prisms of the People: Power & Organizing in Twenty-First-Century America* offers critical insight into the strategies that grassroots organizations and their leaders adopt to gain and negotiate power in modern day U.S. democracy. The prism metaphor is showcased throughout the book as a reflection of how “what happens inside these cases of collective action (the design at the heart of the prism) determines what kind of power (or light) is refracted outside” (Han et al., 2021, p. 3). Through the metaphor of “prisms of people power,” (Han et al., 2021, p. 8) the authors creatively show “the two-way relationship between the ability of grassroots leaders and organizations to exercise power in dynamic political environments and the extent to which these leaders are accountable to an independent, committed, and flexible constituency” (Han et al., 2021, p. 17). Rather than relying on the well-held belief that democratic power exists as a two-way relationship between the government and its people, *Prisms* highlights the role of grassroots intermediaries in power negotiation, focusing on “six case studies of improbable collective action” (Han et al., 2021, p. 10). Across Arizona, Minnesota, Ohio, Virginia, Kentucky, and Nevada, these case studies exemplify how the strategic logic of

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collective action defies expectations and conventional wisdom about how to use activism for political and social change.

While most models of collective action ask, “what vehicles of collective action need,” Prisms necessarily shifts the focus to “how … [vehicles of collective action] turn what they have into what they need” (Han et al., 2021, p. 8, emphasis in original). The book provides three notable contributions to the interdisciplinary scholarship surrounding collective action in the United States. First, political environments are constantly changing, and organizations must build a constituency base that is loyal, flexible, and resilient. Second, Prisms demonstrates that the strategic logic of grassroots organizations and leaders focuses on developing a power source that is not reliant on help from political elites, and which invests in civic feedbacks, or “the downstream consequences of constituency engagement that feed back to shape the strategic position of the organization over time” (Han et al., 2021, p. 20). Third, Prisms cleverly challenges the main models of collective action through its analysis and findings of constituency characteristics—namely, that people exert their agency within the organization through commitment to one another over the organization, self-reflection, and acting as strategists.

Throughout the book’s six chapters, Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa effectively dissect and analyze the evidence gathered from case studies focused on specific organizations and their leaders. The authors strategically employ surveys, interviews, ethnographic observation, internal-to-organization document analysis, and publicly available document analysis to piece together the impacts of these leaders and their constituents. Chapter One serves as an introduction, drawing the reader in with an ethnographic vignette from the book’s Arizona case study. In this case, the organizational leader, Jeff, was catalyzed into action by Arizona’s anti-immigrant Senate Bill 1070 in 2010. This chapter then provides a roadmap for the rest of the book and highlights the authors’ core arguments: 1) organizations that use people power need be strategic to build long-term, sustainable relationships with their constituents; 2) organizations must have a variety of tools in their toolkit to be adequately equipped for uncertainty and future challenges; 3) people-powered organizations have people who are independent, committed, and flexible; and 4) leaders should remain accountable and responsive to cultivate a relationship with their constituents.

In Chapter Two, the authors provide the context from which the book’s analysis stems by delving into the case studies. By way of ethnographic interviews, this chapter provides stories of collective dissatisfaction with the status quo and the strategic push against it. The case studies illustrate how people who are most disenfranchised by political power (e.g., constituents of color or lower socioeconomic status) reclaim this power through community and collective action. Here, the authors also detail their methodology, including how and why they selected these so-called outlier cases to better understand collective action, and specifically why some grassroots organization leaders succeed, by looking for patterns across sociopolitical, organizational, and constituency contexts. In this chapter, the authors reinforce the strategic nature of their methodology, addressing potential questions that might arise for the critical reader, similar to
how organizational leaders behave with their constituents. In this way, Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa build trust with their audience and hold themselves accountable for their work.

Chapter Three of *Prisms* centers the idea of power, problematizing both its definition and measurement. The authors illustrate that power is an interactional, negotiated dynamic between two political actors—and that no single resource equates to power. The amount of money an organization can muster or the number of signatures they can elicit are most often not enough for consistent power negotiation. Instead, consistent power negotiation is better determined by an organization’s people power. As collective action often fails, *Prisms* demonstrates that people power—as an independent source of power—has the potential to impact legislation, political leaders, and executive orders. Rather than apply a blanket-analysis of power across case studies, the authors measure power on a case-by-case basis, using network surveys, assessments of legislative data, and text-as-data tools to measure the power that these organizations (and their leaders) exerted. Interestingly, the authors explain how the organizations under study most often focused on those actors within power relationships with whom they were most closely allied—but perhaps with whom they were not on the same page—rather than staunch opponents, as is often depicted in power struggles.

The fourth chapter gets at the core of the book, the strategic logic of prisms, by analyzing the strategic leadership and logic of the leaders in the case studies. This chapter makes clear why investing in people is critical for organizations and why these organizations opted to do so as a strategy. The authors argue that “leaders’ agency…is a function of the size and quality of the strategic toolkit they develop” (Han et al., 2021, p. 109, emphasis in original). Challenges and uncertainty are commonplace, especially in the complexity of today’s political contexts. Having a wide breadth of tools available makes overcoming these challenges more feasible and allows constituents and their organizational leaders to continue to engage in the power dynamic that is U.S. politics. Rather than succumb to a choice between ideology and pragmatism, leaders push back against this “false choice” (Han et al., 2021, p. 116) and embrace pragmatism while committing to their ideologies because of a flexible and committed constituency base and continued use of civic feedbacks. Chapter Five of *Prisms* highlights how each of the case studies shared four characteristics of “prismatic constituencies” (Han et al., 2021, p. 150): a “deeply intertwined network of relationships” (Han et al., 2021, p. 150); use of constituents as “distributed strategists” (Han et al., 2021, p. 150); constituents who were committed and flexible; and how the constituents “developed identities that bridged distance” (Han et al., 2021, p. 150), thereby helping the organizations build and sustain constituencies as the base of their prism.

The final chapter of *Prisms* serves as a conclusion, highlighting the tenuous balance of power and resulting fragility of democracy. Especially as most of the constituents in these case studies were low-income people of color, including some who were formerly incarcerated, the power imbalance could be shifted further against their favor at any moment. This potential detrimental shift is one of the most pertinent reasons why community and collective action—when people-powered—are so important.
Through analysis of strategically selected outlier case studies, this book offers recourse to readers who have felt hopeless about their ability to partake in democracy and make change. Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa fully address potential limitations of the work—including the challenge of measuring the power leaders exerted and the level of impact organizations ultimately had—as well as how the analysis provided in Prisms is not fully generalizable. Nonetheless, the authors’ findings provide useful insight even across broader contexts.

While there is no direct call to action on behalf of the authors, any reader with an inclination toward activism could glean takeaways from Prisms to apply to their own engagements within organizations. Another key audience for this work would be the leaders of movements and organizations, especially because Prisms provides insights for movement leaders for whom the standard activism playbook no longer works. These takeaways might also help readers to strategically seek out fresh connections with organizations based on newfound understandings of people power and how it can be strategically leveraged by effective leaders. Especially as the political environments across many parts of the country feel so bleak, this book—in its impactful, thorough 167 pages—serves as a counternarrative to the negative, seemingly dismal portrayals of the ability of collective action to effect change in today’s polarized political climate. If these organizations, through investing in people power, can advocate for themselves, others should be able to as well.
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