Talking Population: The Challenges of Communicating on Global Population and the Environment

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ABSTRACT
A comprehensive program of public opinion research is a key element in devising communications strategies on complex, controversial topics. Among the questions research can address are: who will be most likely to support your positions, what messages and messengers will be most influential with them, and which media outlets to approach with story ideas and placements. Two case studies are examined: research on global population growth and on protecting the planet’s biodiversity. The lessons of these efforts are widely applicable, even to relatively straightforward issues of local concern. They include: know your audience, know the messages and messengers they will respond to, and tailor your public activities and media outreach accordingly.

INTRODUCTION
The President of the Society of Environmental Journalists was once asked to name the biggest environmental story that was getting too little coverage. Without a pause, he cited rapid population growth, noting that although it is matter of global concern, “It has no hook.”

In just a few words, this statement summed up the challenges facing anyone who tries to communicate with the news media or influential segments of the public about population issues. Thoughtful people are aware that the global population is growing, and they intuitively recognize the impacts of that growth on natural resources and human relations. They might even have some sense of the social dynamics, including the status of women in developing countries, that affect desired family size and the spacing of children. But lacking a news “hook” – a single notable development or major new trend – even the most thoughtful journalists tend to overlook stories about global population. And when a story fails to make news, it also fails to get on the public policy agenda.

Issues like clean air and water directly affect people’s lives every day – unlike the “bigness” of global population. Thus, linking water shortages or sprawl to the need for more investment in international family planning programs is one important way to raise the salience of the issue of global population. But establishing concrete links to big issues is just one way to bring them to the attention of the public.

Starting in early 1992, the Communications Consortium Media Center (CCMC) led efforts to develop a major, multi-year communications strategy on global population with the support of the Pew Charitable Trusts and its Global Stewardship Initiative, which assembled an array of environmental, population policy, religious, and other organizations. Our main tools for framing the debate and targeting audiences and messengers were public opinion research in the form of scientific surveys, mathematical analysis of the...
surveys to identify population clusters with shared attitudes, and in-depth focus groups.

In the mid-1990’s, we also conducted a similar research effort around the issue of protecting the broad diversity of life on the planet. Again, the challenges centered on finding the segments of the public most likely to respond sympathetically to a communications campaign on biodiversity, devising messages that would resonate with them, and determining the most effective avenues for reaching the target audiences. Both cases have important lessons for communicating on complex issues.

Properly conducted, successful research-based strategies like these will not only get press coverage, but will also energize supporters and equip them to add their own momentum to the strategy’s progress. For instance, at the earliest possible stage of both the population and the biodiversity campaigns, we invited stakeholder organizations to participate in the design of the public opinion surveys, to contribute to the focus-group discussion guides and to witness focus groups for themselves. Because of this, our colleagues viewed the resulting data, analysis, and strategy recommendations with a strong sense of ownership. Some of the major lessons gleaned from these two campaigns are described below.

RESEARCH: AMERICANS RESPOND TO RAPID POPULATION GROWTH

When Americans are asked an open question about the critical problems facing the world, rapid population growth rarely makes the list. Clean air and water top of the list of environmental concerns in most public opinion polling. Yet, when specifically asked to rate population growth among other environmental problems, as many as three in ten (29%) say that it is the most serious. \(^1\) Even so, there is no apparent urgency about it. There is a lack of consensus about this complex issue, which is both global and intimate.

Meeting the challenge of rapid population growth entails diving into a tangled nest of controversies about sex, abortion, and family planning, reproductive health, the empowerment of women, foreign assistance, immigration, and government’s role in determining family size. Finally, there is the simple fact that the impact of population growth is most acute in nations many Americans cannot even find on a map.

As this background suggests, there is intense disagreement about the causes of rapid population growth and whether it will result in major problems in the future or work itself out over time. One extraordinary point has emerged from the research, however. As Global Stewardship Initiative Director Susan Sechler noted, “People may disagree about the seriousness or causes of rapid population growth, but they were fully supportive of the solutions.” In this case, the solutions included improving child survival rates, making contraceptives available to all who want and need them, and expanding the educational and economic opportunities open to girls and women in developing nations.

From this finding, we identified a basic rule of communicating on global population issues: focus on the solutions and do not debate the problems.

TARGETING: WHOM DO WE REACH AND HOW DO WE REACH THEM?
A major portion of our efforts on population centered on setting the stage for the United Nations Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). Slated to take place in Cairo, Egypt in September 1994, ICPD became an important “hook” for American news media and a single focus for the policy discussion of population.

As the message development work proceeded, analysis of the polls showed that from a purely demographic perspective, three groups should be targeted for educational messages on global population: women with advanced education, who are sensitive to environmental concerns and constitute an important bloc of voters; people over the age of 60, who are more likely to respond to appeals about the condition of the planet for future generations; and younger people, ages 16 to 24, who are likely to be concerned about the environment.

Next we tackled the related questions: how do we reach these people, and what sources do they rely on for timely news and credible commentary? A desirable approach is to include questions about news sources in the survey research; however, since all news outlets have extensive information about their audiences, it is possible to use that information to put yourself in the shoes of the people you want to influence.

If your main objective is to reach key members of Congress, the Washington Post, The New York Times, and the members’ hometown media are critical first targets. When a particular issue is the focus of ongoing controversy, then it becomes important to show members that there is support for a position on the editorial pages and in the op-ed columns of newspapers around the country. Since CNN and C-SPAN are piped into nearly every office on Capitol Hill, it is valuable to get interview slots on those networks, and to design events that will attract coverage by them. The weekend talk shows fuel much of the discussion among the policy elite in Washington, so getting useful information into the hands of the panelists on those programs is an indirect way of reaching administration and congressional targets.

On the other hand, if you are trying to reach scientific communities, a mention in the policy pages of publications like Science, Scientific American, or any of a number of more specialized publications can be much more effective than air time on C-SPAN. Then again, when one is trying to reach the business community, publications like Forbes, Fortune, the Wall Street Journal and Business Week take on added importance.

The general rule is to find out where the people you are trying to influence get their news and information, and to devise tactics to get into that flow of information. Communicating on population meant that considerable outreach efforts were directed to major women’s magazines, which tend to be
overlooked in policy-related campaigns. Print outlets that tend to attract an older audience were another focus. Additionally, women journalists were targets, since they are likely to “connect the dots” on population issues, international assistance, and women’s rights.

Of course, we approached any outlet that had favorably commented or reported on population issues in the past, on the premise that they would require less educating. Finally, we mounted an explicit effort to counter the widespread use of the term “population control” because of its unfortunate suggestion of imposed values and coercion.

The results of this effort were gratifying. The ICPD prompted a flood of coverage and commentary on population issues, including nearly 5,000 newspaper clips, which ranged from news reports and commentary to op-ed pieces and editorials. The articles noted both the urgency of action and the new thinking on population policy that were at the heart of the Cairo agenda. In particular, a large number of articles and editorials made specific reference not only to meeting the global need for family planning services, but also to the newly enhanced role of women in making global policy.

FRAMING THE DEBATE – VALUES AND PRIORITIES
The language, symbols, anecdotes, and other information used in a communications strategy are critical factors in determining whether it will succeed or fail. And just like targeting, the best way to develop and test different themes with different audiences is through public opinion research. It is extremely important, however, to talk to people in terms that matter to them and to do so in ways that cut through the glut of information they receive day after day. We learned during the campaign on biodiversity that such terms must include more than an array of facts and figures. The most successful media campaigns combine factual arguments with messages that appeal to the deeply-rooted values shared by most Americans.

In-depth research by the Washington, D.C.-based polling firm Belden, Russonello & Stewart, based on decades of available data, concludes that most Americans share basic or primary values including responsibility for one’s family, caring for one’s self, personal liberty, hard work, spirituality, honesty and integrity, and fairness and equality. A secondary set of values includes responsibility to care for others, personal fulfillment, respect for authority, and love of country or culture.

Although the importance of these broad concepts seems obvious, many communications strategies either ignore values altogether, or mistakenly try to be everything to everyone. Different segments of the public emphasize different values when coming to a position on topics of social importance. However, with a basic understanding of the importance of these enduring values, and an awareness of the major issues, you can develop straightforward, value-centered messages to advance even the most complex proposals.
For example, in 1998 and for several years leading up to it, opinion polls generally showed that the public considered promoting safety and stopping violence to be a top issue. (See Figure 1, which is based on a compilation of survey results over the past several years before and after September 11, 2001. It summarizes the answers to: “What are the top issues facing America today?”)
Given this information, we were asked how to effectively frame children’s issues, especially “programs related to childcare or foster care.” Although they care about them, most Americans do not rank these as top concerns. They are generally considered third-tier issues. However, if one frames these same children’s services as “programs that promote safety and prevent violence,” emphasizing the elements that have strongest resonance with the public, the majority of the public and media will listen and be more supportive. Conversely, if spokespersons use terms such as “risk assessments” and other social work jargon, the public and media will definitely “tune out.”

DEVELOPING MESSAGES
Some communicators worry that “framing” messages in this way seems like a cynical approach to manipulating segments of the public. However, while it is true that some campaigns are based on the principle, “Tell the people what they want to hear,” the advice here about framing should not be construed to countenance lying. In the long run, lies, contradictions, and inconsistencies will be rooted out by people’s common sense and value systems.

To succeed, a communications strategy needs messages that are simple, clear, focused, and consistent. Once they are set, those messages should be integrated into all materials and emphasized in the training of spokespersons. Message points should be re-examined on a regular basis, and revised to reflect new trends and developments.

PROTECTING THE DIVERSITY OF LIFE ON EARTH
CCMC was involved in a major research effort by environmental groups to devise a communications strategy around preserving biodiversity – the great variety of life on the planet. The project involved dozens of organizations and three distinct phases that included focus groups and a comprehensive public opinion poll.

Unfortunately for proponents of biodiversity preservation, the research found that although a large majority of Americans supported the principle of protecting endangered species, most were unfamiliar with the term “biodiversity,” and some who heard it for the first time had mixed reactions. One focus group participant said it sounded like “a government program, and I’m not ready for it.” Others described it as the “circle of life,” picking up a theme from a then-popular movie, “The Lion King.”

The survey research placed special emphasis on learning about the underlying values that inform the public’s view on the environment. The most widely held values were responsibility to family and a sense of personal stewardship of the Earth, and a responsibility to leave the planet in good condition for future generations. At the start of those discussions, participants expressed a near-consensus conviction that humans need to protect plant and animal species to preserve the balance of nature – and that if humans were responsible for
contaminating parts of the planet, they had a responsibility for cleaning them up. In other words, they made a huge distinction between problems caused by people and environmental problems attributable to natural disasters.

Similarly, when asked early in the survey about their personal level of support for maintaining biodiversity, 87% said it was important to them. Demographically speaking, those who believed maintaining biodiversity was “very important” were found to have lower incomes, live in cities, and disproportionately to be African American or Latino. Politically, they tended to be Democrats or Independents.

The most resonant themes centered on protection of ecosystems, because most people had no trouble identifying the benefits that proceed from environmental stewardship, like clean water. However, the focus groups and the survey both found that this broad support for maintaining natural habitats and protecting species plummets when the public considers other issues such as jobs, property rights, human convenience, and whether all species are equally worthy of protection.

A second major objective of the poll was to analyze how segments of the population could be divided according to attitudes on biodiversity. A mathematical analysis identified eight distinct segments of the American public that shared demographic traits and also similar attitudes about biodiversity. Two of them, totaling 23% of the public, were identified as likely targets of support for maintaining biological diversity; three other segments, or 34%, were deemed persuadable; added together, the supporters and persuadable constitute a targeted majority of 59%.

This research also went a step further than most by asking respondents to identify their favored leisure activities and the sources of information most important to them. This line of inquiry established some interesting possible targets – for instance, younger men who had gone cross-country skiing the previous year.

CONCLUSION
The type of comprehensive, sophisticated research that went into the biodiversity and global population strategies can help to set targets in several ways. It can tell you who will be most likely to support you, what messages and messengers will be most influential with them, and which media outlets to approach with story ideas and placements. While most not-for-profit groups are more likely to have concerns and goals that are closer to home than biodiversity protection and the rate of global population growth, the principles behind framing the message for target audiences on complicated global issues apply to local efforts. In short, know your audience, know the messages and messengers they will respond to, and tailor your public activities and media outreach accordingly.
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