Disrupting the Discourse: Framing at the Intersection of Racism and Opportunity

Dis beat disrupts
This beat obstructs the justice of the peace…
This beat came out so downright outrageous
It choppin' the melody like a machete

- George Clinton, composer and philosopher

While talking about race has been declared passé in some communications circles, any examination of conservative framing on crime, public school funding, welfare and more show that they seem to talk about little else.

Affirmative action, public school funding, income supports – virtually every major political battle underway today banter race somewhere close to the surface. Race and more precisely racism, is where the contest for the "dominant frame" is most intense and where, when we don't pay close attention, we often lose the battle.

If progressives remain silent about race, they not only concede the race frame to the right. They concede all of the issues that conservatives successfully racialize. And the list of these issues grows long. The fight over affirmative action invoked centuries old notions of who is capable and deserving and who is not. When President Reagan introduced America to the welfare queen, we certainly got the picture in living color. And what's the main rationale the right uses for public budget cuts? So *those* people won't waste your hard earned money.

The right frames nearly everything in a neat "us" and "them" and, more often than not, the dividing line is the color line. And they have centuries of stereotypes on their side. Their frames are like an old song that's hard not to hum once the music starts. Winning hearts and minds on a wide range of social justice issues requires that we disrupt these centuries of programming with a few old songs of our own.

And it will take more than trying to code our language behind vague "values" like equality, opportunity or fairness. It is easy to get people, even people with whom we often disagree, to agree that equality and opportunity is good. Disrupting the dominant frames on race, deservingness and competency means focusing on two main questions: *Why* are things the way they are? And *how* can they be different? The answers to these questions distinguish our "opportunity talk" from the opposition.

Every "why" leads us to a different "how". Their "why" stories are bursting with cultural and biological pathology as an explanation for everything from poverty, school failure to crime. When the opposition starts that old song of pathology, it will only lead toward policies that punish individuals. Our job as progressives is to expose *patterns and systems of injustice* in ways that help people understand the structural roots of these issues and shift blame away from victims. When we disrupt their frame and assert a different story, things change.

Books Not Bars is a coalition housed at the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights fighting for radical changes in the juvenile justice system. There was no avoiding race in this work as media coverage of juvenile justice issues became little more than framing youth of color as "super predators" devoid of humanity and beyond rehabilitation. The Oakland-based project started with research and training from Youth Media Council, which did an extensive content analysis of coverage and suggested messaging that attacked racist coverage directly. In addition, Books Not Bars did research on funding, corporate ties and other information that helped them develop a landscape analysis of the issue. Developing a landscape analysis means looking at the political and institutional context of an issue. Among the questions every advocate should ask: *Who benefits? Who is harmed? Who has power? Who is left out?* For Books Not Bars, the answers led them to a campaign that moved the public conversation from supporting more detention facilities to support for closing down what was to be one of the largest juvenile detention facilities in the nation. There are a number of important lessons in their success.

Take time to document patterns of unfairness and identify practical solutions. Research is key in developing a landscape analysis that will take you to the necessary evidence of unfairness as well as practical "how" steps for change. The campaign to shut down the juvenile "super facility" facilitated a conversation on budget priorities, education, rehabilitation and reminded the public of what was really at stake: the future of thousands of young people who deserved much better.

Avoid the easy trap of telling individual, "episodic" stories to advance the issue. Although sympathetic characters and moving stories make for gripping entertainment, they don't do much to advance policy agendas over the long haul. It is not enough to exclaim the numbers of youth of color that are failed by their schools. It is not even enough to find that especially heartwarming story among the exceptions. We must tell stories of the machinery, the *institutional practices* that make things unfair. Books Not Bars put together a range of spokespeople from youth to academics that helped convey a more complete yet compelling story of the problem without sacrificing news value. When choosing messaging and spokespersons, make sure that they will help illustrate your "why" and take your target audiences to your "how" things should change.

Don't ignore those most affected. Sometimes we get so caught up in trying to convince our opposition that we forget the importance of building power for change among those most affected. In fact, a number of communications campaigns including immigration rights and affirmative action initiatives helped to build power of the opposition by mostly echoing and reinforcing their underlying themes. Resources spent to convince the opposition more often solidify their power, make their institutions richer and reinforce core beliefs about race, humanity and worthiness. Books Not Bars reached out to youth and ethnic media to ensure that their media work supported their organizing efforts. They invested efforts in building voice and power among those most affected in order to expand their base of active support for the campaign while building for future initiatives. After all, a majority is not built by focusing on the opposition. It is built by expanding the base of supporters starting at the core and working progressively outward.

Watch our language. As advocates we must constantly ask ourselves, "Are we speaking in terms that our constituents would recognize as a 'close relative' of their own thoughts and dreams?" Or do we invent new words and ideas that neither they nor our spell checks can recognize?

In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, James Scott examines over one thousand years of rebellion among the oppressed. His research asserts the existence of what he describes as the "hidden transcript", private discourse among the marginalized that takes place out of the view of the dominant class. This "transcript" unfolds in barbershops and at kitchen tables, and it is encoded in youth popular culture as hip hop music and graffiti. For example, the fact that people of color are often hassled by the police is common knowledge. Even prior to the public emergence of the term "Driving While Black," talk about racist treatment by the police was pervasive in African American communities whether it was from the pulpit, on the school yard or on a rap record. When the term Driving While Black emerged, it was widely adopted because it helped to validate a community's reality that was mostly hidden from the mainstream.

In short, although people are not talking about data and theory in the supermarket line, they often already possess an awareness and analysis of the social issues that affect their lives. The oppression and alienation they feel become a private song that they believe only they know. Effective change communications unveil these "songs" as a shared story that makes visible the way our private pain is part of a larger pattern. And, along with effective organizing and analysis, we can help shape these individual songs into a kind of choir; a shared understanding of why things are wrong and that something concrete can be done to make a difference.

Of course, communications is not a panacea. It is a tool to be used in concert with many others but one we cannot afford to ignore. We need to monitor coverage of the issues and never hesitate to write or call outlets when coverage is missing key voices, shows bias, or is poorly done. We have to develop and nurture an infrastructure for media—data, sources and studies that document the problems and their root causes, and other resources that help illustrate the "landscape" stories we must tell.

Advancing our agenda requires that we help others believe in the viability of our ideas – many of which we have experienced only in fleeting moments and in some cases, only in the realm of imagining, in the realm of the story. Yet, as many of the case studies in this book illustrate, we are forging these ideas into reality everyday, opening up space for new imaginings. These successes affirm that no matter how loud or pervasive the frames of the opposition, justice remains a catchy tune.

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