

Communicating About Poverty and Low-Wage Work: A New Agenda

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October 2007



The Mobility Agenda
A Special Initiative of Inclusion

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ABOUT



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The Mobility Agenda, an initiative of *Inclusion*, identifies new ideas and strategies to strengthen the labor market for the research and policy-making communities, encouraging a much-needed dialogue about improving low-wage work for the economy, employers, communities, and workers.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Inclusion's Mobility Agenda thanks The Joyce Foundation for its support of the initiative's research and policy analysis on low-wage work.

INTRODUCTION

Over 40 million jobs in the United States—or about one in three—pay low wages. The great majority of low-wage jobs lack benefits such as health insurance or retirement accounts and provide little or no chance for career advancement. These conditions translate into 35 million Americans who earn poverty-level incomes, while millions more struggle to make ends meet.¹

Yet, in the face of this urgent problem, many anti-poverty advocates express great optimism about achieving effective policy solutions. They argue that a confluence of trends and focusing events—ranging from the devastation of Hurricane Katrina to the presidential campaign—have created the opportunity to mobilize public support for policies that improve the lives of low-wage workers, reduce poverty, and strengthen the country.

Seizing upon this policy moment, progressives have pitched a variety of specific proposals. The menu includes raising the minimum wage; increasing access to health, disability, and life insurance; requiring retirement benefits and paid time off; offering job training and education; subsidizing child care; expanding housing vouchers and the Earned Income Tax Credit; increasing unemployment benefits; expanding Pell Grants for college; promoting unionization; and modernizing the food stamp and TANF programs.

While many innovative policy ideas have emerged, in order to energize wider public concern and build a broad policy coalition, progressives need a unifying theme that goes beyond the traditional language of poverty and that makes meaningful to a diversity of audiences otherwise apparently isolated problems and solutions. For many Americans, much of the language used by progressives still inadvertently places the roots of poverty in the same problematic mental boxes related to race, individualism, and moral failings. Moreover, currently there is no agreed upon blueprint for communicating the “big picture” on how the minimum wage, for example, is connected to Pell grants for college, housing vouchers, or increased workforce unionization.

Figuring out what meanings and themes connect the dots on proposals is central to building support across diverse segments of the public, not just the traditional progressive base. The task will also be central to shaping media portrayals, defining policy options, and insulating against attacks and counterarguments. This report points the way forward.

Beyond a Language of Poverty

Any political issue can be defined by multiple meanings and dimensions. These alternative interpretations, often apart from any “objective” indicators of a problem, serve as the basis for how policy-makers and advocates define an issue, how journalists cover it, and how citizens arrive at political judgments and choices. As part of the power game of politics, strategists routinely attempt to control media attention to an issue while simultaneously defining the topic in a way that emphasizes certain considerations over others. As I review in this report, poverty is by no means an exception to these rules. Indeed, it is no accident that the 1996 bill that enacted unprecedented welfare reform was titled the “*Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act*.”

1 H. Boushey et al., *Understanding low-wage work in the United States*, Inclusionist.org, 2007. Available at <http://www.inclusionist.org/files/lowwagework.pdf>.

The fact that language is such a central factor in policy debates is an unfortunate outcome of human nature. Given the many competing issues in society to consider, it is unlikely that the public will ever be well informed about the benefits and trade-offs of specific anti-poverty proposals. Instead, in the absence of an integrated understanding, the public is likely to rely heavily on a variety of relevant and potentially conflicting interpretative shortcuts, including their core values, various cultural stereotypes, and those definitions of the issue made most readily available in news coverage.

This tendency on the part of citizens falls well short of democratic ideals, but it remains a political reality. In order to be successful at engaging the public on low-wage work issues, progressives need to effectively navigate the contours of the media system and public opinion. This does not mean engaging in false spin, as many anti-welfare advocates have done in the past. To the contrary, progressives have a duty and a calling to tell the public the truth about the policies they believe will make for a better America. Applying research about the public and the media to this challenge will only help progressives communicate the truth more effectively and clearly.

In this report I review previous findings on how the public and the media interpret issues related to poverty and low-wage work. In the first section, I summarize the enduring core values, stereotypes, and patterns in news coverage that anchor the public's ambivalence about poverty. I then turn to recent research examining the communication dynamics of the 1990s welfare reform debate. This research shows that despite great optimism about current polling trends, American views about poverty are little different today than they were during the 1980s.

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In the third section, I introduce the concept of framing as a central tool in “connecting the dots” for the public, journalists, and policy-makers. As I review, research from early in this decade identifies several promising alternatives to the traditional appeals on poverty. Specifically, in place of a sympathy for the poor frame, this research suggests emphasizing “responsible economic planning,” with the central issues defined as jobs, community interdependence, and collective prosperity. These new definitions closely parallel lessons from Great Britain’s “social inclusion” campaign and are likely to be more effective in communicating to diverse audiences how structural problems in the economy and society are pulling Americans apart.

ENDURING INFLUENCES ON PUBLIC OPINION

During the 1990s, there was an explosion of research in political science, communication, and sociology on the factors that shape public opinion and media coverage of poverty-related issues. While this past research might focus at times on attitudes or news coverage specifically about welfare reform, multiple strands of evidence demonstrate that the same general principles still apply today, despite changes in the political and media environment. These factors include the stubborn perceptual screen of individualism and belief in limited government; lingering racial stereotypes; and patterns in how the news media, particularly TV news, cover issues related to poverty and low-income work.

Conflicting Values and American Ambivalence

When reaching judgments about poverty, Americans actively draw upon a few core cultural values. In particular, many survey analyses have identified a belief in individualism as guiding preferences about social spending and policies. The assumption underlying a belief in *individualism* is that economic opportunity in the United States is widespread and that anyone who tries hard enough can succeed.² Yet other values also play a role. In particular, individualism is balanced in the minds of many Americans by *humanitarianism*, or the belief that government has an obligation to assist those who are most in need.³

In one classic study demonstrating this ambivalence, political scientists John Zaller and Stanley Feldman⁴ analyzed the open-ended answers of respondents in the National Election Study to questions about whether or not the government should spend more on social services, including education and health. The two researchers discovered that the respondents who opposed increased spending offered thoughts that drew almost exclusively on individualism and a corresponding belief in limited government. These respondents consistently emphasized personal effort, responsibility, and hard work while opposing increased taxes and bureaucracy.

In contrast, *supporters of increased government action were far more likely to mention beliefs that were contrary to their preferred policy position.* Although these respondents emphasized the core value of humanitarianism—mentioning a duty to help others and the need for the government to provide social assistance—they *also* warned against increased taxes and bureaucracy, and mentioned that, before receiving assistance, individuals should always try to get along on their own.

Research in psychology identifies “belief in a just world” as a construct very similar in definition and influence to individualism. This orientation is anchored in America’s most common explanation for success: The world is a fair place and hard-working people get what they deserve. Yet here again, in this

2 M. Gilens, Race and poverty in America: Public misperceptions and the American news media, *Public Opinion Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (1996): 513-535.

3 J. H. Kuklinski, *Citizens and politics: Perspectives from political psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

4 S. Feldman and J. Zaller, The political culture of ambivalence: ideological responses to the welfare state, *American Journal of Political Science* 36 (1992):268-307.

research, views about poverty are marked by ambivalence, turning on the distinction in the public's mind between the "*deserving poor*" and the "*undeserving poor*." ⁵

Consider the results of an experiment involving several hundred adult subjects from the New York metropolitan area. When the participants were asked about their support for policies providing cash benefits and full medical coverage, "perceived deservedness" was the strongest factor shaping their response. This perception, however, varied by the circumstances and the description of the recipient group. Widows with children, the physically handicapped, and the physically ill scored higher in deservedness; teen mothers, single moms, and able-bodied men scored lower. ⁶

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In a follow-up national survey, subsamples of respondents were read varying vignettes about a hypothetical mother named Lisa "who is having a difficult time making ends meet." Depending on the vignette, characteristics about Lisa were altered, so that for one subsample she was portrayed as taking no steps to improve her situation while for other subsamples she was described as taking either one, two, three, or four different actions. Across these conditions, among respondents scoring low on "belief in a just world," the more actions Lisa was portrayed as taking on her own behalf, the more deserving of government aid she was deemed.

Yet among respondents with a strong "belief in a just world," the more actions Lisa was portrayed as taking, the less supportive they were of government assistance. For these respondents, the depictions of Lisa's actions as failing to improve her social standing directly challenged their belief that hard work is all that is needed for people to get ahead. In order to defend this worldview, respondents quietly denigrated Lisa's deservedness. A strong "belief in a just world" served as a particularly powerful lens, with these respondents opposing aid to Lisa even in the face of evidence that she was taking action to address her situation. ⁷

Given these findings, the authors suggest that in appeals to the public, instead of emphasizing personal stories about the poor, advocates should focus on systemic and institutional reasons for poverty that are beyond the control of individuals. As I review later, other researchers have arrived at very similar conclusions. In addition, this research suggests that the label "working poor" may itself be problematic. Given a cultural belief that if people are industrious they will succeed, this term sounds somewhat contradictory, and is likely to trigger confusion and negative connotations, especially among those Americans who have a strong "belief in a just world."

5 L. D. Appelbaum, The influence of perceived deservingness on policy decisions regarding aid to the poor, *Political Psychology* 22 (2001): 419-442; R. E. Lane, Self-reliance and empathy: The enemies of poverty—and of the poor, *Political Psychology* 22, no. 3 (2001): 473-492.

6 Appelbaum, The influence of perceived deservingness.

7 L. D. Appelbaum et al., When effort is threatening: The influence of the belief in a just world on Americans' attitudes toward anti-poverty policy, *Political Psychology* 27, no. 3 (2006): 387-402.

Black Stereotypes in White America

While core values and psychological orientations play a significant role in structuring American views about poverty, the issue is by no means “race neutral.” In fact, based on analyses of multiple national surveys, the political scientist Martin Gilens⁸ concludes that among whites, the belief that “black people are lazy” is the most important source of opposition to spending on welfare and to programs that provide direct assistance such as food stamps and unemployment benefits.

To probe more carefully whites’ racial perceptions of welfare recipients, Gilens in one survey design asked white respondents their impressions of a welfare recipient described alternately as either a black mother or a white mother in her early 30s who had been on welfare for the past year. In his analysis, Gilens determined that holding negative perceptions of white welfare mothers led to some increase in opposition to welfare spending, but the increase was limited. In contrast, holding negative views of black welfare mothers resulted in substantial increases in opposition.⁹

Gilens¹⁰ suspected that the stereotype that blacks are poor and lazy was likely to be constantly reinforced by the images portrayed in news coverage. He compared the relationship between the real-world incidence of blacks in poverty to shifts in news magazine and TV portrayals, examining any corresponding changes in the public’s perception of poverty’s racial composition. Between 1985 and 1991, while the actual percent of poor who were black remained relatively constant at about 29 percent, the proportion of blacks featured in media portrayals of poverty increased from 50 percent to 63 percent; and public estimates of the proportion of the poor who were black increased from 39 percent to 50 percent.

Other research is consistent with Gilens’ conclusions. For example, Gilliam¹¹ traces the stereotype of the “black welfare queen” to a story recited in stump speeches during the 1976 presidential campaign by Ronald Reagan. Gilliam argues that the image has become a common script found in TV news coverage. In his experiments testing the effects of these stereotypes, Gilliam finds that when white viewers watch TV news portrayals of black mothers on welfare, exposure leads viewers to oppose welfare spending and to endorse beliefs that blacks are lazy, sexually promiscuous, law breakers, and undisciplined.

In a third study analyzing Chicago-area TV news coverage, Entman and Rojecki¹² conclude that news images encourage the belief that the prototypical poor person is black. Specifically, the dominant visuals

8 M. Gilens, Racial attitudes and opposition to welfare, *Journal of Politics* 57 (1995): 994-1014; Race-coding and white opposition to welfare, *American Political Science Review* 90 (1996): 593-604; and *Why Americans hate welfare: Race, media, and the politics of anti-poverty policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

9 Gilens, Race-coding and white opposition to welfare; and *Why Americans hate welfare*.

10 Gilens, Race and poverty in America.

11 F. D. Gilliam, The “welfare queen” experiment, *Nieman Reports* 53, no. 2 (1999): 49.

12 R. Entman and A. Rojecki, *The Black Image in the White Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

in TV stories related to poverty were blacks in organized activities like marches, meetings, or church; and blacks milling around streets, frequently pictured with police officers. Moreover, beyond images of race, they found that poverty itself was seldom the direct subject of a news story, with reports rarely focused on low income, hunger, homelessness, low housing quality, unemployment, or welfare dependence. Instead, the focus was symptoms associated with poverty, particularly racial discrimination and problems of health or health care.

TV News and Attributions of Responsibility

In combination with core values and stereotypes, the public tends to reach decisions on political issues by reducing them to questions of responsibility and blame. In answering these questions, the public relies heavily on the news, especially television. Across a series of studies, communication researcher Shanto Iyengar¹³ finds that the mode of presentation in TV reports of poverty can alter viewers' interpretations of causal responsibility (i.e., judgments about poverty's origins) and treatment responsibility (i.e., judgments relative to who or what has the power to alleviate poverty).

Based on his analysis of TV reports from the late 1980s, Iyengar concluded that most reports tended to be packaged in "episodic" terms, focused on a particular event or individual, defining poverty relative to concrete instances. (An example would be a story filed during an especially cold winter in Chicago depicting a single mother struggling to meet the cost of heating.) Far less common were "thematic" TV stories that took the form of more general backgrounders, placing poverty in the context of social conditions or institutions.

In experiments, Iyengar discovered that in contrast to thematic reporting, episodic stories led white middle-class viewers to assign the causes and treatments of poverty to individuals rather than societal conditions and government institutions. Race also played a role. News coverage of black poverty in general, and episodic coverage of black mothers specifically, heightened the degree to which white middle-class viewers held individuals responsible for their economic plight.

Overwhelmed by personal stories, viewers tend to miss out on any greater understanding of the systemic causes of poverty.

Gilliam¹⁴ notes that while the natural tendency for journalists and advocates alike is to tell personal stories about issues with the goal of capturing interest and stirring emotion, episodic presentations are likely to lead viewers to "miss the forest for the trees." Overwhelmed by personal stories, viewers miss out on any greater understanding of the systemic causes of poverty. In other words, memorability and vividness in news portrayals of poverty likely come at the expense of support for public policy. Since most anti-poverty advocates support institutional fixes to the problem, thematic TV news stories are likely to favor the effort to build public support for these goals.

13 S. Iyengar, *Is anyone responsible? How television frames political issues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

14 F. D. Gilliam, *Vivid examples: What they actually mean and why you should be careful using them*, Frameworks Institute E-Zine (undated).

THE DECADE AFTER WELFARE REFORM

In a series of published analyses, political scientists Sanford Schram and Joe Soss identify each of the previously described factors as contributing to the passage in 1996 of welfare reform. Yet, as they explain, while many centrist Democrats predicted that the victory would pave the way for more meaningful anti-poverty policies, the intensive communication campaign needed to build support for the historic legislation might have inadvertently delivered many self-inflicted wounds. In the public's mind, there remains the interpretation that poverty is fundamentally a problem anchored in personal responsibility and race. Despite many recent focusing events and powerful economic forces, public perceptions today are little changed from the 1980s.

For decades, in attacking the welfare system, conservatives claimed that symptoms associated with poverty such as crime, teen pregnancy, and drugs were in fact the result of a permissive system that allowed lifelong dependency on government assistance. Poverty, in fact, was an outcome of big government. By the early 1990s, centrist Democrats had concluded that conservatives had successfully used welfare to turn the public against any public spending and to stoke the flames of racism. Yet they reasoned that if Democrats could reform welfare and make government aid recipients appear to “play by the rules,” then they could claim political credit, undercut racism, and mobilize the public in support of more effective anti-poverty policies. Soon after his election, Clinton set the agenda for these efforts, vowing in his 1993 State of the Union address to “end welfare as we know it.”¹⁵

Playing on the public's conflicting orientations toward individualism and compassion for the “deserving poor,” both conservatives and centrist Democrats recast policy initiatives in terms of “welfare to work,” and labeled bills using frame devices such as “personal responsibility,” “temporary assistance,” and “family self-sufficiency.” Uglier, more tacit messages evoked the myth of the “black welfare queen” or similar race codes, while the news media's episodic presentation style and skewed depictions of race further reinforced individual attributions.¹⁶

This message campaign successfully redefined welfare for the public as a social crisis. In 1992, only 7 percent of the public named welfare as the most important problem facing the country, but by 1996, this number had risen to 27 percent.¹⁷ In fact, by 1996, given magnified media attention and selective interpretations that played on public values and racial attitudes, more than 60 percent of Americans supported handing responsibility for welfare over to the states, and a similar number supported capping the duration of welfare benefits at five years. In August 1996, following successful Congressional passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, more than 80 percent of the public said that they supported Clinton's signing the bill into law.¹⁸

15 J. Soss and S. F. Schram, A public transformed? Welfare reform as policy feedback, *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 1 (2007): 111-127.

16 S. F. Schram and J. Soss, Success stories: Welfare reform, policy discourse, and the politics of research, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 557 (2001): 49-65.

17 Soss and Schram, A public transformed?

18 G.M. Shaw and R.Y. Shapiro. The Polls--Trends: Poverty and Public Assistance, *Public Opinion Quarterly* 66 (2002):105-128.

In the decade since 1996, the emphasis on ending “long-term dependency” continues to serve as the primary criterion by which many elites and the news media define the success of welfare reform. Specifically, journalists have focused almost exclusively on statistics showing a decrease in welfare caseloads and an increase in the number of individuals who have left welfare to take low-wage jobs.¹⁹

Public Opinion Today: Tipping Point or Illusion?

By making welfare more “morally demanding,” centrist Democrats hoped to reinstall confidence in the ability of the government to help the poor. Strategists, pundits, and several prominent scholars had predicted that welfare reform would set in motion a powerful policy feedback effect, removing the taint of racism, and opening up the public to support for more effective policies.

Unfortunately, in a systematic analysis comparing multiple indicators of polling data gathered between 1998 and 2004 with data from the late 1980s, Soss and Schramm²⁰ find no evidence for this impact. The tendency for Americans to blame poverty on a lack of effort has held steady, feelings toward the poor have grown slightly cooler, willingness to aid the poor has stayed the same or diminished, and racial attitudes color support for assistance to the poor.

Yet, pointing to more recent polling data, influential progressives remain optimistic that the public is finally ready to get behind a campaign against poverty.²¹ In particular, a widely talked about analysis by Pew²² indicates a roughly 10 percent shift between 1994 and 2007 in the public’s agreement that the government should take care of people who can’t take care of themselves, guarantee food and shelter for all, and help more needy people even if it means government debt.

The tendency for Americans to blame poverty on a lack of effort has held steady, feelings toward the poor have grown slightly cooler, willingness to aid the poor has stayed the same or diminished....

However, as Soss and Schramm point out, any comparison to 1994 is misleading, since these polls were taken at the height of the welfare reform campaign. During this period, news attention to welfare soared, with the coverage overwhelmingly negative in its tone. By 1998, however, news attention and negativity

19 S.F. Schram and Soss, J. Success stories: Welfare reform, policy discourse, and the politics of research. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 557 (2001): 49-65.

20 Soss and Schram, A public transformed?

21 J. Halpin, Reducing poverty is the right goal, Center for American Progress, April 26, 2007; R. Teixeira, Public opinion snapshot: Americans extend helping hand to the poor, Center for American Progress, April 27, 2007.

22 Pew Center for the People and the Press, Trends in political values and core attitudes: 1987-2007. Available at <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=312>.

had both sharply declined.²³ In reality, absent very salient messages attacking welfare programs, *what the 2007 polls reveal is a normalization of public attitudes about poverty to their pre-Clinton-era levels, rather than any turning point in public sentiment.*

Several progressives also argue that the public no longer fixates on the individual, moral, and racial underpinnings of poverty. As evidence, they point to the results of a 2001 NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy School survey.²⁴ But, if anything, the results of this survey are strongly consistent with the body of evidence from previous studies. The public still views poverty through the strong lens of individualistic and moral failings. For example, when asked about the major causes of poverty, 70 percent of Americans agree drug abuse is a major cause; 52 percent agree that a lack of motivation plays a strong role; and 57 percent agree that decline in moral values is to blame. Only 47 percent of the public think that welfare recipients really want to work, and 57 percent think that welfare encourages women to have more children. Among the 61 percent of Americans who think welfare reform has been effective, 62 percent believe it is because reform has forced more people to go to work. Racial bias also remains pervasive. In the survey, 44 percent of respondents estimated that either half or three-quarters of poor Americans were black.

Today, these enduring misperceptions continue to be reinforced by leading political figures, even by moderates such as New York City's mayor, Michael Bloomberg. Though he might be celebrated in the press for promoting innovative anti-poverty policies, Bloomberg's language and definition of the problem are decidedly old-fashioned. In speeches, he argues for restoring the "dignity of work" and "ending dependency" by "restoring personal responsibility" through a program that "incentivizes personal decisions."²⁵ All of these phrases serve as powerful triggers, setting in motion a train of thought that narrowly places responsibility for poverty on the individual rather than on society and its institutions.

23 S. K. Schneider and W. G. Jacoby, Elite discourse and American public opinion: The case of welfare spending, *Political Research Quarterly* 58 (2005): 367-379.

24 Halpin, Reducing poverty is the right goal.

25 M. Bloomberg, Address to the Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, August 28, 2007. News from the Blue Room. Available at www.nyc.gov.

FRAMING THE PROBLEM AND THE SOLUTIONS

The realities of income disparity, low-wage work, and economic insecurity span partisan, ideological, and racial boundaries. Yet in the language of advocates and in the minds of the public, policy solutions continue to be filtered through the powerful lenses of individualism, limited government, and racial bias. If progressives are going to wake the country up from this perceptual Groundhog Day, they need to develop a message that emphasizes shared common values and interests. Moreover, this language has to be systematically investigated and tested not with any particular party, candidate, or electoral goal in mind, but rather with an eye toward going beyond the progressive base, building and maintaining a diverse coalition around meaningful policy action.

The public, journalists, and policy-makers need a new framework for connecting the dots on otherwise apparently isolated issues and policy solutions. Using communication tools such as framing to help citizens see clearly the linkages between their everyday lives, their specific values, and the problems associated with poverty is by no means a magical key to unlocking support, but it is a first step.

What is Framing?

The concept of framing turns on what observers have understood for centuries: When it comes to storytelling, communicators can select from a plurality of interpretations, with these preferred meanings filtered by the predispositions of the audience, shaping their judgments and decisions. The earliest formal work on framing traces back four decades to the anthropologist Erving Goffman. In his ethnographic research examining how individuals make sense of their environment and interpersonal interactions, he described frames as “schemata of interpretation” that allow individuals to “locate, perceive, identify, and label” issues, events, and topics. Words, according to Goffman, are like triggers that help individuals negotiate meaning through the lens of existing cultural beliefs and worldviews.

In the 1970s and 1980s, cognitive psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky applied framing in experimental designs to understand risk judgments and consumer choices. The two psychologists discovered that the different ways in which a message is presented or “framed”—apart from the content itself—can result in very different responses, depending on the terminology used to describe the problem or the visual context provided in the message. They concluded in their Nobel Prize-winning research that “perception is reference dependent.”²⁶

More recently, the linguist George Lakoff²⁷ has popularized framing by drawing attention to the failures of progressives to effectively communicate their preferred policies, arguing that metaphors related to the family and morality, when activated by language, structure citizens’ interpretations of politics. Framing has also become the topic du jour of political strategists and pundits, serving as a buzzword to describe

26 D. Kahneman, Maps of bounded rationality: A perspective on intuitive judgment and choice, in T. Frängsmyr (ed.), *Les Prix Nobel: The Nobel Prizes 2002* (Stockholm, Sweden: Nobel Foundation, 2003), 449-489.

27 G. Lakoff, *Don't think of an elephant: Know your values and frame the debate* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2004).

what is sometimes referred to as either effective communication or what critics decry as “false spin.” GOP pollster Frank Luntz is widely credited with figuring out much of the language that has been effective at promoting the preferred policies of conservatives. On the issue of poverty, Luntz helped design the Republican Contract with America, a document that proposed the “Personal Responsibility Act,” which promised to “discourage illegitimacy and teen pregnancy by prohibiting welfare to unwed mothers...” The subtitle of Luntz’s recent best-selling book, *Words that Work*, echoes the conclusions of Nobel Prize winners Kahneman and Tversky: “It’s not what you say, it’s what people hear.”

Over the past two decades, research in political communication and sociology has added to previous anthropological, psychological, and linguistic work on framing to explain how media portrayals in interaction with cultural forces shape public views. Frames are used by audiences as “interpretative schema” to make sense of and discuss an issue; by journalists to craft interesting and appealing news reports; and by policy-makers to define policy options and reach decisions.²⁸ In each of these contexts, frames simplify complex issues by lending greater importance to certain considerations and arguments over others. In the process, they help communicate why an issue might be a problem, who or what might be responsible, and what should be done.

It’s not what you say, it’s what people hear.

The latent meaning of any frame is often translated instantaneously by specific types of frame devices such as catchphrases, metaphors, sound bites, graphics, and allusions to history, culture, and/or literature. Frame devices are used strategically in almost any policy debate. Consider just a few prominent and successful examples of such devices that have been used to alter the focus of policy:

1. Republicans have used the frame device “death tax” to recast estate tax policy in populist terms and to trigger wider public concern.
2. Democrats have used the phrase “gun safety” to shift the traditional debate over “gun control” away from a focus on civil liberties and instead toward an emphasis on public health.
3. Greenpeace has used the term “frankenfood” to redefine food biotechnology in terms of unknown risks and consequences rather than the industry-promoted focus on solving world hunger.
4. Religious conservatives have relabeled the medical procedure know as “dilation and extraction” as “partial birth abortion,” pushing decision-making on whether to use the procedure away from doctors and into the hands of Congress and the courts.
5. Anti-smoking advocates have promoted the term “big tobacco,” a headline-friendly phrase that immediately emphasizes considerations of corporate accountability and wrongdoing.

28 D. A. Scheufele, Framing as a theory of media effects, *Journal of Communication* 49, no. 1 (1999): 103-122.

6. Anti-evolutionists have coined the slogan “teach the controversy,” which instantaneously signals their preferred interpretation that there are holes in the theory of evolution and that teaching rival explanations for life’s origins is really a matter of intellectual freedom.

Frames, Values, and Poverty

In the debate over poverty and low-wage work, by choosing among available interpretative devices and metaphors, progressives can clarify the issue in a format that fits with journalistic norms and the constraints of a particular news medium. Yet in doing so, they are also able to tailor their messages so that they might better resonate with the backgrounds of specific audiences, allowing these targeted audiences to more easily integrate, categorize, and make sense of how the many policy solutions fit together into a coherent and meaningful “big picture.” In this light, when applied to the targeting of specific audiences, framing can be used to “go beyond the choir,” and serve as a tool to engage nontraditional audiences on anti-poverty efforts.

Research on framing suggests that establishing a connection with audiences derives from the fit between the frames embedded in a message and the interpretative schema that a particular audience possesses based on personal experience, socialized values, or ideology. As shortcuts for reducing complexity, schema allow any individual—whether an average citizen, journalist, or policy-maker—to categorize new information quickly and efficiently, based on how that information is framed. One common source of audience schema is long-term socialized worldviews that are closely linked to cultural and social identity. As previously reviewed, on issues related to poverty, these long-term socialized schema are likely to be closely related to individualism, a belief in limited government, humanitarianism, and racial stereotypes.

A recent study conducted by Penn State researchers demonstrates the ability of news frames to activate the core values of either individualism or humanitarianism as the criteria by which audiences evaluate anti-poverty initiatives.²⁹ In this experiment with college students, subjects were first asked to fill out a questionnaire that measured their orientations toward both individualism and humanitarianism. They were then asked to read one of two different versions of a newspaper article about poverty, and after finishing the article, they were instructed to write down any thoughts that came to mind. As depicted below, the first article by way of the headline and lead paragraph framed the issue in terms of individualism and the second article framed the issue in terms of humanitarianism.

Headline: *Welfare Reform Must Require Strict Work Requirements*

Americans remain sharply divided on whether welfare reform should expand work requirements or increase aid to low-income families. Welfare critics argue that recent welfare reform *legislation doesn't go far enough to require recipients to work for their benefits. They would like to see tougher work requirements on welfare benefits.*

29 F. Y. Shen and H. H. Edwards, Economic individualism, humanitarianism, and welfare reform: A value-based account of framing effects, *Journal of Communication* 55, no. 4 (2005): 795-809.

Headline: Tough Welfare Restrictions Said to Hurt the Poor and Children

Americans remain sharply divided on whether welfare should expand work requirements or increase aid to low-income families. Welfare supporters and defenders *warn that further restrictions on welfare benefits would hurt children and the poor. They argue that welfare reform should aim to reduce poverty and assist needy families.*

Not surprisingly, subjects who read the first article recorded significantly more thoughts that were in line with individualistic objections to welfare. In comparison, the subjects who read the second article were more likely to write down thoughts that were in line with a humanitarian support for welfare. Yet more importantly, readers of the first article who also scored high on individualistic values generated significantly more statements opposing welfare than readers who did not score high on this value orientation.

In other words, the news article's selective emphasis on individual accountability triggered the application and intensification of this core value in evaluating welfare reform. A similar amplification, however, was not found among subjects reading the second article who also scored high on humanitarianism.

Consistent with the study by Feldman and Zaller,³⁰ this experiment provides further evidence that when it comes to American ambivalence about poverty, it remains an uneven playing field. *In comparison to humanitarianism, the core value of individualism exists as a far more potent schema, always ready to be triggered by way of selectively framed arguments and news coverage.* Identifying new methods for communicating about poverty that do not activate America's most enduring worldview remains the central challenge for the progressive community.

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Economy and Prosperity Rather than Poverty

To date, the most comprehensive evaluation of framing in the context of low-wage work and poverty was funded by the Ford Foundation and carried out by Meg Bostrom and her firm, Public Knowledge LLC. In a series of focus groups and survey analyses conducted in 2001, 2002, and 2004, Bostrom identified several alternative frames that might be able to break through the public's persistent belief that poverty is a matter of individual failure, establishing a train of thought that focuses instead on systemic problems and solutions.

Not surprisingly, in focus groups and initial survey work, Bostrom³¹ identified public support for progressive anti-poverty initiatives as hampered by core American beliefs in individual responsibility and equal opportunity rather than equal outcome, and a preference for limited government. Moreover, in

30 Feldman and Zaller, The political culture of ambivalence.

31 M. Bostrom, Responsibility and opportunity, Economy that Works Project of the Ford Foundation, 2002; and Responsible planning for the future, Economy that Works Project of the Ford Foundation, 2002. Both available at <http://www.economythatworks.org/reports.htm>.

survey work, although a majority of the public indicated that they backed several proposals designed to aid low-wage workers, this support was “soft,” meaning that if presented with counterarguments that activated considerations of individualism or limited government, support dropped an average of 25 percent.

Based on this exploratory work, Bostrom³² developed and tested several rival interpretations to the traditional “sympathy for the poor” frame that focused on individual stories and solutions. She tested these frames as experiments embedded in a nationally representative telephone survey (N=3205). Across subsamples of survey respondents, she tested the traditional “sympathy for the poor” frame, a new “responsible economic planning” frame, and a slightly different “responsible community planning” frame.

Within subsamples, these alternative frames were repeatedly administered across questions that asked generally about issue priority, issue concern, news attentiveness to the issue, the perceived cause of a decline in wages, followed by an agree/disagree attitudinal question regarding what should be done in terms of policy. This innovative design ensures that across the survey a specific frame of reference or “train of thought” is established for the respondent before answering a series of “key indicator” questions.

At the end of the survey, these “key indicator” questions were used to test the relative “effects” of the three frame conditions. Respondents were asked about the perceived opportunity to get ahead; preferences for government action on the economy; the priority of specific economic policies; beliefs relative to how the economy works; and perceptions regarding who is to blame for poverty. Table 1 summarizes the language used in each frame to set the train of thought for respondents on the issue of low-income work and poverty.

32 M. Bostrom, *Together for success: Communicating low-wage work as economy, not poverty*, Economy that Works Project of the Ford Foundation, 2004. Available at <http://www.economythatworks.org/reports.htm>.

Table 1. Description of Frames Tested

Frame	Script Read to Survey Respondents
<i>Sympathy for the Poor</i>	<p>In a weak economy the working poor have to take any job they can get... Imagine the plight of a single mother working a low-wage job. Even at \$10/hour she earns only about \$20,000 a year with few benefits like healthcare and paid leave. Who could support a family on \$20,000 a year? The working poor frequently need to choose between buying food and paying the rent. We need to ask our government officials to find a way to address these problems and help those in need.</p>
<i>Responsible Economic Planning</i>	<p>The nation is relying too heavily on low-wage service sector jobs from national companies without insisting that they pay workers good wages and benefits... Creating prosperity tomorrow requires responsible planning today. Too many companies and decision-makers focus on short-term profits and short-term thinking to the detriment of our workforce. And when we allow one part of the workforce to weaken and struggle, it weighs down the economy for us all, resulting in a lower standard of living. Our nation needs to change its short-term thinking and start building good-paying jobs with benefits, and a strong economy for the long term. With better planning we can repair the nation’s economic engine and create a future with a strong economy and good-paying jobs for our workers.</p>
<i>Responsible Community Planning</i>	<p>Communities are relying too heavily on the low-wage service sector jobs that national companies bring to an area without insisting that the national companies invest back into the community by paying workers good wages and benefits... Creating prosperous communities tomorrow requires responsible planning today. Too many companies and decision-makers focus on short-term profits and short-term thinking to the detriment of our communities. And when we allow one part of the community to weaken and struggle, it weighs down the economy for us all, resulting in a lower standard of living. Our nation needs to change its short-term thinking and start building good-paying jobs with benefits, and strong communities for the long term. With better planning we can repair the nation’s economic engine and create a future with a strong economy and good-paying jobs and strong communities.</p>

Among the frames tested from table 1, the most effective interpretation for activating support across diverse audiences was the *responsible economic planning frame*. In the survey analysis, when presented in this context, policies were supported by net margins 4-11 percent higher than when framed in traditional terms of “sympathy for the poor.” Moreover, the responsible economic planning frame also rated as more credible than other well-worn arguments such as “breaking a cycle of childhood poverty” and the emphasis on a “fair economy” where “people who work hard shouldn’t be poor.”

In earlier research, the responsible economic planning frame also tested effectively across a variety of questions that altered the spokesperson delivering the message, including a religious leader, a waitress and single mom, a union head, an economist, a CEO, and a city mayor.³³ This particular framing offers further utility. As Bostrom describes it, because the public tends to prioritize issues related to the economy and pay comparatively closer attention to economic news, recasting issues related to low-wage work in the context of responsible economic planning is likely to place these issues higher on the public’s agenda.

...recasting issues related to low-wage work in the context of responsible economic planning is likely to place these issues higher on the public’s agenda.

Perhaps most importantly, in the survey analyses, the economic planning frame was able to generate added support for low-wage work issues among nontraditional segments of the public, audiences for whom the typical sympathy for the poor frame might actually activate increased opposition. These groups included the self-identified “working class,” non-college-educated and older men, union voters, and older voters without a college education. The frame even appeared to soften opposition to proposals among traditional Republican voters.³⁴ Table 2 reproduces the key differences and points of emphasis that Bostrom identifies between the responsible economic planning frame and the sympathy for the poor frame.

33 Bostrom, Responsible planning for the future.

34 In terms of activating core supporters for low-income proposals, Democrats responded positively to all three frame treatments, but in comparison, the responsible community planning frame generated slightly stronger support for specific policy.

Table 2. Key Elements of Frames

Responsible Economic Planning	Sympathy for the Poor
The issues are the economy, jobs, and the future of prosperity.	The issues are poverty, the poor, and the working poor.
The relevant values are responsibility, vision, stewardship, interdependence.	The relevant values are sympathy, disparities, the Golden Rule, and generosity.
The economy is a system that can be influenced; humans have power to influence economic conditions.	The economy is irrelevant, or it is cyclical, uncontrollable.
Trends, broader influences are integral to the story.	Profiles of sad individuals are integral to the story.
The reader’s relationship to the problem is connective; it is about “us.”	The reader’s relationship to the problem is separate; it is about “them.”
Solutions are the focus; the problem is manageable.	Problems are the focus; the issue is overwhelming.
Responsibility for fixing the problem lies with citizens collectively. Strengthening communities is one of the objectives for action.	Responsibility for fixing the problem rests with the individuals who are having the problem.

Lessons from Social Inclusion

The ability of the “responsible economic planning frame” to unify public support reflects closely the successful efforts in Great Britain by Tony Blair and the Labour party to redefine anti-poverty initiatives in terms of “social inclusion.” Instead of alleviating the *condition* of poverty and its implied moral and racial underpinnings, the new social inclusion direction in government was about improving “prospects

and networks and life chances” rather than simply raising the dollar amount of wages or redistributing wealth through cash welfare benefits or taxes.³⁵

The language and metaphors of social inclusion are designed to focus attention on the structures and processes that exclude certain groups of individuals from full participation in society. Similar to the “economic planning frame,” the logic emphasizes that in a competitive global marketplace, the nation is stronger, more secure, and better off if more of its population can participate fully in the labor force and economy. The metaphor of the “caravan of the desert” has been offered as a frame device to quickly and vividly translate the meaning of social inclusion:

One can picture our nation as a convoy crossing the desert. Everyone may be moving forward, but if the distance between those at the back and [the] rest of the convoy keeps growing there comes a point at which it breaks up.³⁶

Besides engaging the public, the social inclusion language also helped redefine in new and more politically successful terms the evaluation and measurement of long-standing problems of inequality and disadvantage.³⁷ In other words, framing not only structures the interpretations of the public and the portrayals of the news media, but in contexts such as Congress, framing can also impact the specifics of policy decisions, altering the options that are considered and how they are measured.³⁸

In a recent white paper, *Inclusion* applies the social inclusion frame to a reformulation of the definition and measure for low-wage work.³⁹ This approach defines low-wage work as a job that pays less than two-thirds of the median wage for men. In analyses and graphical displays of data, this recalibration of jobs away from the traditional measure of either below or above

As a nation, we are stronger and more cohesive if we have an economy that does not allow those at the back to fall so far behind that...the nation breaks apart.

35 N. Fairclough, *New Labour, New Language?* (London: Routledge, 2000).

36 Greg Clark, “Poverty is Too Important an Issue to Leave to the Labour Party,” Conservative Home Blogs, <http://www.tinyurl.com/wkjlo>. Clark’s convey image is borrowed from journalist Polly Toynbee’s book *Hard Work: Life in Low-Pay Britain*, London: Bloomsbury, 2003. See Polly Toynbee, “If Cameron Can Climb on My Caravan, Anything is Possible,” *The Guardian*, November 23, 2006, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Columnists/Column/0,,1954790,00.html>.

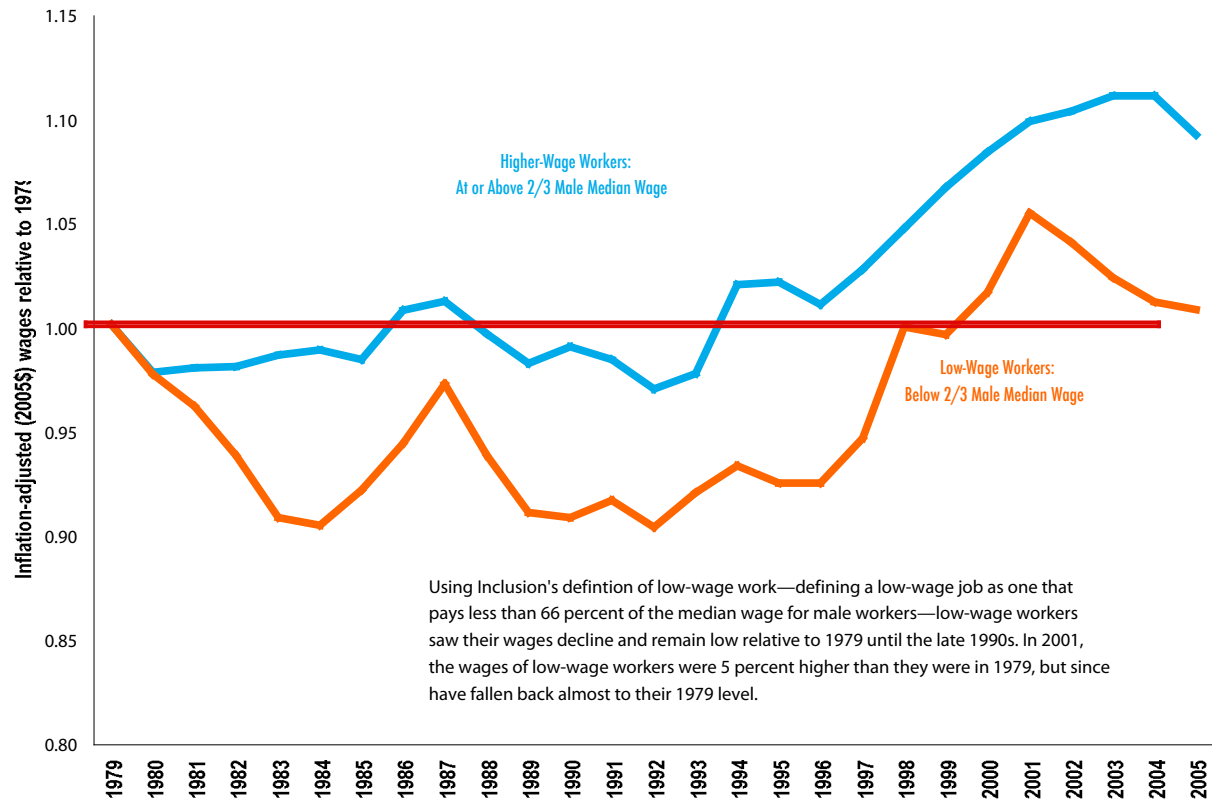
37 J. MacLeavy, The language of politics and the politics of language: Unpacking “social exclusion” in New Labour policy, *Space and Polity* 10, no. 1 (2006): 87-98.

38 M. C. Nisbet and M. Huge, Attention cycles and frames in the plant biotechnology debate: Managing power and participation through the press/policy connection, *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 11, no. 2 (2006): 3-40.

39 Boushey et al., Understanding low-wage work in the United States.

the poverty line more accurately and effectively communicates how structural problems in the economy and society are pulling workers apart. This “much less than the rest” approach shows that for low-wage workers, inflation-adjusted wages today are roughly equivalent to what they were in 1979.

Figure 1: Pulling Apart: Wage Trends for Low-Wage and Higher-Wage Occupations, 1979-2005



Source: Boushey, H., Fremstad, S., Gragg, R., and Waller, M. Understanding low-wage work in the United States. Inclusionist.org, 2007.

As the authors of the report argue, while remaining accurate, this new metric also fits better with a message that might mobilize broader segments of the public to care about low-wage issues. Echoing the “economic planning frame” as well as social inclusion’s “caravan in the desert” metaphor, the authors’ emphasize:

An economy that leaves a substantial segment of workers far behind the rest of the workforce is contrary to the national belief that the United States is “one nation, indivisible.”... As a nation, we are stronger and more cohesive if we have an economy that does not allow those at the back to fall so far behind that the essential unit of the nation breaks apart.⁴⁰

40 Ibid., 5.

CONCLUSION: A RESEARCH AGENDA

So what are the lessons for effectively communicating about poverty and low-wage work? First, it's clear that traditional appeals that profile the plight of individuals, lament the "unfairness" in hard-working Americans having to live in poverty, or emphasize the moral duty to help the disadvantaged run up against strong perceptual screens. While these arguments accurately reflect reality and may mobilize natural allies and constituencies, research suggests that such language only further reinforces individual, moral, and racial attributions of blame for the problem.

Despite the celebrated success of welfare reform along with the optimism generated by many recent focusing events, Americans still apply the same principles in interpreting the causes and solutions to poverty that they did back in the 1980s. These mental categories act as perceptual blast shields, insulating the public from opinion change. If progressives don't evolve in their communication strategies, there is little reason to expect that the public's outlook and policy preferences will change.

Second, it's also clear that there is promising research that offers a path forward and that should be pursued. Progressives are compelled to tell the public the truth about the policies that are likely to make our country stronger and that allow Americans to build a future together around shared values and opportunities. By turning to research on framing, progressives can tell this truth more effectively.

Key Recommendations

Do the research. Effective communication is a science. Skill and personal experience should be informed by a systematic understanding of the media system and how nontraditional audiences make sense of issues related to poverty and low-income work. Previous research funded by the Ford Foundation points to promising alternative ways to define the problem of poverty and progressive solutions. Moreover, this initial research is at least partly consistent with historical lessons from the "social inclusion" campaign used by the Labour government in Great Britain.

Instead of relying on traditional messages that engage the progressive base but only activate stereotypes and misperceptions among other audiences, organizations should employ focus groups, experiments, and surveys to further identify and test alternative messages and frameworks. This research needs to be done not with party, candidate, or electoral goals in mind, but rather with the aim of building a diverse movement of support for innovative policies.

Moreover, while past research has focused extensively on how attitudes related to blacks shape the reception and interpretation of messages, little or no research has explored the influence of stereotypes related to Latinos and immigrants. There also needs to be more careful examination of how the effectiveness of frames varies across segments of the public, especially among important subgroups of independents, Republicans, and other nontraditional allies.

Not only do the specific frames matter, but there also needs to be the identification and testing of specific frame devices, i.e., the catchphrases, slogans, visuals, and allusions to history or culture that instantly translate these latent meanings. Obviously, some of this language is likely to be religious in nature, meaning that progressives need to be comfortable in employing such messages while engaging with conservative church organizations and groups. This last recommendation also underscores the importance of not only

testing frames, but also further testing the types of opinion leaders who might be best at delivering these messages to specific groups.

Stay on message. In part, conservatives have been successful in deflecting the policy efforts of progressives because they are adept at maintaining consistent messaging around a narrow set of frames. This kind of discipline results in making readily accessible those interpretations that successfully trigger the most favorable mental categories among audiences. As the progressive community comes together to fund and investigate new messages about poverty and low-wage work, the outcome of this research has to be employed systematically across organizations and policy efforts, otherwise little benefit will be realized. As a way to marshal resources for research and to build community consensus around a message strategy, progressives should partner with foundations to hold a series of national communication summits on these issues.

...hold a series of national communication summits on these issues.

Break the tyranny of the news peg. As reviewed in this report, past research shows quite clearly that patterns in news coverage, in particular television reporting, reinforce public stereotypes and perceptual biases about the causes and solutions to poverty.

While more recent analyses⁴¹ suggest that progressives have been successful in moving print news coverage to more thematic depictions of structural problems and solutions, there is little research indicating whether or not TV news has shifted from its preferred package of episodic coverage. There is also little recent data on racial bias in news coverage generally, and TV news particularly, and almost no data on local television news coverage of low-wage issues.

Moreover, these recent analyses show that, even as of 2006, media attention to the “working poor” or “low-wage jobs” is still relatively limited in comparison to other major policy issues. In addition, few stories appear on national television news, still the preferred source of public affairs information for most Americans. Finally, even when these terms are mentioned, media attention is frequently incidental to a broader focus on issues such as either health insurance or housing generally.

The challenge for progressives then is to figure out how to break the tyranny of the news peg in coverage of poverty and low-wage work. In other words, what types of staged news events and story pitches successfully generate both print and television news attention, result in an emphasis on preferred frames, and reach key targeted audiences? For example, in her report, Bostrom⁴² concludes with a few ideas about several possible news angles that might activate in coverage a responsible economic planning frame. More work in this area needs to be done. In combination with research on frame development and testing, research should examine how to effectively build attention to these frames through both print and television news coverage.

41 Gould Douglas & Company, *Between a rock and a hard place, Economy that Works Project of the Ford Foundation, 2001*; and *Working press: An analysis of media coverage on low wage work. Economy that Works Project of the Ford Foundation, 2007.*

42 Bostrom, *Together for success.*

Sponsor social media campaigns. Traditional news coverage is not the only media that matters in engaging the public on poverty. On other issues, films such as *Super Size Me* and *An Inconvenient Truth* have been used as part of a larger effort to put a public face on policy debates, build activist networks, and catalyze social action. Films are powerful communication tools because not only do they present potentially alternative frames of reference for their direct audiences, but they can also have an impact on the news and policy agenda, shaping how a problem and its solutions are defined. With increasing frequency, they are the catalyst for a “social media campaign,” bringing together filmmakers with partner foundations and progressive organizations.⁴³ On poverty-related issues, a leading recent example was the film “Waging a Living.” Released as part of the 2006 season of the PBS series *POV*, the film chronicled the stories of minimum-wage workers. Leading up to its appearance on local affiliates, *POV* specifically targeted media efforts at news outlets in 17 states that had minimum-wage initiatives on the ballot in the 2006 election. Comparative case study examinations of similar social media campaigns would provide valuable insight into how films can be used systematically and strategically.

Facilitate incidental exposure. In today’s media world, with so many competing content choices, the challenge is to find ways to “incidentally” expose audiences to coverage and information about poverty-related issues in media zones where they are not looking for it. In other words, news coverage and social documentaries will reach an attentive public, but how do progressives use the media to reach audiences who might hold latent support for progressive proposals on poverty, but not otherwise have the motivation to pay attention to public affairs coverage? As recent presidential campaigns demonstrate, in order to reach this vast inattentive public, it is important to seek coverage at entertainment outlets such as late night comedy shows and various celebrity journalism outlets. In part, success in this area depends not just on researching the right messages and frames, but also having the resources to partner with celebrities and to create “progressive-generated” online media that intersect with the many features of Web 2.0, including blogs, video sharing portals, and social networking sites. The Bono-led and Gates Foundation-funded “One” campaign, with its focus on poverty in Africa, offers a leading example of how progressives can use entertainment media outlets to reach otherwise inattentive audiences.

43 M. C. Nisbet, Understanding the social impact of documentary film, in K. Hirsch, *Documentaries on a mission: How non-profits are making movies for public engagement*, A Future of Public Media Project, funded by the Ford Foundation. Center for Social Media, American University, 2007. Available at http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/files/pdf/docs_on_a_mission.pdf.

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