

# The Explanation Gap: How Democracy Depends on Nonprofit Organizations

by Joseph Grady, Ph.D. and Axel Aubrun, Ph.D.

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*If a nation expects to be ignorant and free ... it expects what never was and never will be.*

*Thomas Jefferson*

*People's inability to understand basic scientific concepts undermines their ability to take part in the democratic process.*

*Jon D. Miller, director of the Center for Biomedical Communications at Northwestern University Medical School (NYTimes.com "Scientific Savvy? In U.S., Not Much").*

*Well-informed laymen make up the foundation of a healthy society.*

*Charles Schulz*

**A**DVOCATES OFTEN DEFAULT TO A COMMUNICATIONS approach that can work in the short run, but whose effectiveness is very limited over the long haul. A strategy based on “gaining mind-share,” “breaking through the communications clutter,” and so forth, can certainly succeed in bringing an issue “top of mind,” but it is also very likely to leave the public in the dark about the big picture surrounding an issue. This trade-off severely limits the impact that nonprofits can have on the most important challenges that face our society, because it ignores the critical relationship between nonprofits and democracy. Put simply, nonprofits need democracy to bring about long-term solutions, often through policy changes; and democracy in turn depends on

nonprofits to educate the public about the important and critical issues that face us.

Americans from Thomas Jefferson to Charles Schulz have affirmed one of the basic principles of American democracy: Government by the people requires that the people actually understand the issues, situations, and decisions with which they are faced. The alternative, they warn, is all too often manipulation of the people by those who do understand.

In fact, as advocates at nonprofit organizations realize all too well, the public often understands frighteningly little about critically important issues. Too few Americans, for example, understand that Social Security taxes are not directly repaid to us when we retire; that the current economic disparities among different ethnic groups were partly created by the historical distribution of opportunities like the G.I. Bill; that global warming is caused by a layer of carbon dioxide that is accumulating in the

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atmosphere and trapping in heat; that current commercial fishing techniques (unrelated to pollution) inevitably disrupt vital ecosystems; that early maltreatment of children (including neglect and emotional abuse) can affect the development of brain architecture; and so forth.<sup>1</sup> Without this basic understanding, the American people often aren't prepared to make the informed decisions that are central to the democratic system. And in the absence of public understanding, the democratic machinery typically fails to engage, and does little to provide real solutions to these collective challenges.

In short, nonprofits have a key—and too-often neglected—role to play in our democracy, in helping people *understand* the basics of a public-interest issue, the steps that can be taken to fix it, and the role that citizens can play. In this article, we discuss recent advances in addressing the challenge of educating the public—one that is based on providing simple and effective explanations of complex or abstract issues.

### Who Informs the Public?

There are two sectors of society that are widely understood to have a role in creating the educated public that democracy depends on: first, schools are supposed to equip us with the basic skills and knowledge that allow us to assimilate new facts—in a word, *literacy*. Second, journalism's role is to *inform* us about the particular issues and situations that are currently facing us. But schools, even at their best, obviously can't prepare Americans to reason effectively about all the important issues we must contend with, if only because the world and our understanding of it are constantly and rapidly evolving—many important contemporary issues were simply not on the radar when current voters were ten years old.

Nor can the news media be counted on to provide the public with the kinds of explanations that can help us make truly informed judgments. In part, this is because of often-discussed biases toward sensationalized coverage, "status quo" sources, easily gathered material, stories that don't threaten corporate sponsors, etc. A more fundamental problem is that journalism's inherent emphasis on *facts* means that *explanations*—of causality, of bigger-picture contexts, etc.—take second place

at best. (Political scientist Shanto Iyengar has discussed a closely related problem with TV news in particular—the predominance of "episodic" coverage, about specific incidents, and a near-absence of "thematic" coverage, about trends and contexts.<sup>2</sup>) The inadequacy of media coverage by itself is evidenced by the fact that decades of information about global warming in the news (e.g., the rise in average temperatures, the potential for ice cap melting), has not resulted in widespread understanding of how the phenomenon works, even on the simplest level.

In short, American democracy is diminished by what we call an *explanation gap* in the public discourse. The consequences of this gap should not be underestimated. Effective explanations not only increase awareness of particular issues, they also allow the public to understand the choices that face us as a society. Ultimately, they make democracy possible.

The role of a third sector in American society in helping the public understand issues is less widely recognized. As Alexis de Tocqueville pointed out a century and a half ago, organizations that are neither commercial nor governmental play a critical role in the American democratic process. By identifying and promoting public interest issues, he argued, "voluntary associations" allow the public to make collective choices about issues that would otherwise have escaped the democratic process. They feed the machine of democracy.

As society, science, and technology become more complex, it becomes increasingly apparent that a key part of "identifying and promoting" the issues is explaining them, and so a more specific role has emerged for nonprofits: namely, to help bridge the explanatory gap. Nonprofits are well-positioned for the role, since they have the expertise and the means to introduce issue-explanations into the national conversation, by passing explanations along to the media when their issue "hits the news," for example. Importantly, this role transcends particular issues—it concerns the health of American democracy as a whole.

### Explanations that Work<sup>3</sup>

Crafting good explanations, however, is not always as easy as it seems, and there are a number of ways in which explanations can (and often do) "misfire."



**Going over people's heads.** One reason that advocates and experts go over people's heads is that they are so deeply involved in an issue that it can be very difficult for them to see past their own assumptions about what people know and understand. An explanation that seems ridiculously simplistic to an insider can still be too technical and jargon-filled for a layperson to understand. Consider these two issue explanations presented (by nonprofit organizations) with broad general audiences in mind:

*Global warming:* Solar radiation passes through the clear atmosphere. Most radiation is absorbed by the earth's surface and warms it. Some solar radiation is reflected by the earth and the atmosphere. Some of the infrared radiation passes through the atmosphere, and some is absorbed and re-emitted in all directions by greenhouse gas molecules. The effect of this is to warm the earth's surface and the lower atmosphere.

*Biomagnification:* The most dangerous traits of the organochlorines are their persistence—that is, their tendency to remain chemically active for a long time—and their solubility in fat, which means they become stored in fatty tissues within organisms and can accumulate over time. Because of these two traits, contaminant levels become more concentrated with each step up in a food chain—a process known as *biomagnification*.

Many readers would be puzzled by the language in these passages, and many more would simply ignore the text altogether, since it seems to be written for “someone else”—that is, people with special scientific knowledge. This prose

might be suitable for people interested in “digging deeper” to understand more about the problem, but not for people who are learning about it for the first time, and who do not already have a special interest in the topic.

**Reinforcing the wrong ideas.** Besides going over people's heads, another common trap advocates fall into is to reinforce ideas that work directly against the goals of a communication. For example, when a rural advocacy group tells readers, without further context, that “fewer than 15% of rural residents receive any federal housing help,” this can easily sound like *good* news—confirmation of the common view that rural people live simpler, more self-sufficient (and therefore better) lives than those of us in urban America.

And when an organization offers the following explanation of risk factors for diabetes among African Americans, it practically ensures that readers will blame the individuals for their behavior, rather than learning something about public health and the contexts that lead to disease:

*Being overweight or obese, not getting regular physical activity, and not eating enough fruits, vegetables, and whole-grain foods are linked to increased risk of developing diabetes. On average, African American adults and adolescents have very high rates of overweight and obesity as well as low rates of meeting physical activity and fruit and vegetable intake recommendations.*

**Facts vs. explanations.** Each of the last two examples illustrates another, even more fundamental problem in many advocates' communications—the emphasis on statements of fact rather than explanations that provide new understanding. These are often treated as interchangeable, but in terms of the effects they have on people's thinking, they are anything but. At this point, it is worth considering a bit more deeply what it really means to inform people.

### Engaging the “Responsible Mind”

The findings from decades of research into how people think offer some important lessons for communicators who are interested in helping people reason more effectively about issues and become more engaged with them (the two

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typically go together). Here are two basic principles that emerge from the cognitive and social sciences.

*Cognition* is not organized around *facts*, but around what researchers call *frames, schemas, models, scripts, scenarios*, etc.

Unless explained properly, facts can tell a very different story from the one that is intended (and true). This is because facts are only understood in terms of the richer mental models within which they fit. A fact like “poverty has doubled in the county over the past five years” can mean many different things depending on the particular mental *models* of poverty that are guiding people’s reasoning. Although poverty can be defined quantitatively in terms of income and assets, these definitions don’t capture how laypeople actually understand the term. People’s models or frames for poverty involve ideas about why people are poor (e.g., “they don’t work hard” or “they’re born into a set of disadvantages”), ideas about what the day-to-day experience of poverty is like (e.g., images of violent urban housing projects, or of rustic family scenes), and so forth. To really help people understand a point about poverty—and especially, to change their current understanding—communicators need to offer true explanations, involving cause and effect, for example, rather than just numbers and static images.

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This is a straightforward point, but one that advocates often ignore or don’t fully appreciate. Explanations should be as concrete as possible, even if this means providing metaphors and analogies for topics that are inherently abstract. (After all, much of people’s everyday thinking and language uses metaphors as simple as “heavy workload,” “approaching completion,” etc.). Even a highly educated audience grasps concrete ideas much more quickly and effectively.

When explanations follow these principles, they are much more likely to help change thinking.

### Issue Examples

Consider the following issue areas, where progress has come along with increased understanding:

**Ozone hole.** While the problem is not yet solved, very substantial steps have been taken to address it. Not coincidentally, a high proportion of Americans know that aerosols and CFCs have a destructive effect on the ozone layer,<sup>4</sup> and that the resulting “hole” allows sunlight to penetrate the atmosphere in harmful ways. The very concrete language (and images) of the ozone hole—which seems like a hole in our metaphorical “roof”—have certainly been factors in helping American society grasp and take responsibility for the problem.

**Mental health.** There is still a great deal of progress to be made in educating Americans about mental health, but there has also been an undeniable change for the better on the levels of both attitudes and policy. Behind this change is the growing understanding that brain chemistry and anatomy contribute to behaviors that used to seem simply “crazy” or “bad.” Various nonprofits have helped promote messages about “brain disorders” and “chemical imbalances,” for instance. Even if only understood in a simplistic way, these biological explanations for behavior have had the virtue of concreteness, and have opened the door to entirely new ways of understanding familiar problems.

**Tobacco.** The history of the tobacco issue is very complex, but explanation is certainly one of the factors that has led to more restrictions on the use of tobacco products. For instance, people now recognize, as they did not a generation ago, that cigarette smoke contains chemicals that are physically addictive, and that second-hand smoke has health consequences for nonsmokers.

In each of these cases, the public has been offered a concrete explanation involving cause and effect, and the result has been that parts of people’s minds that would otherwise not have

been engaged have helped them view the problem in new ways. (For further discussion of these principles of explanation, see the e-zines on “simplifying models” and “causal sequences,” authored by Cultural Logic for the FrameWorks Institute—[www.frameworksinstitute.org/products/kids.shtml](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/products/kids.shtml).)

**Does an explanation really work?** Journalists and experts (e.g. economists, biologists) sometimes hit on an explanation that works well with the public. The term “ozone hole,” for instance, was coined by a chemist, Sherwood Rowland, and publicized by Walter Sullivan of the *New York Times*. (Note, by the way, that the idea of a “hole” in the ozone layer is an effective *metaphorical* explanatory concept—there is no literal hole, but only a diminished density in a particular region.)

But getting an explanation right is so important that it probably shouldn’t be left to chance, especially given that many explanations that sound promising actually prove to be startlingly ineffective. The history of the global warming issue is sobering and instructive here. The term “greenhouse effect” was coined in 1896 by Swedish chemist Svante Arrhenius. Even though this seemingly clear explanatory model has been widely publicized for many years, it has not entered the minds of the American public. In Cultural Logic’s experience talking with several hundred laypeople about the issue of global warming, we found that virtually none used the term “greenhouse” when trying to explain how global warming works—not coincidentally, virtually none were aware of the basic heat-trapping mechanism behind global warming, which the greenhouse analogy is supposed to convey.

In short, even when it seems like an explanation has the right qualities, it is well worth doing research to determine whether it actually works with “real people”—or is doomed by the fact that people have little experience with greenhouses, for example, and aren’t truly conscious of how they trap the sun’s heat. And nonprofits are the actors who are the most likely to invest time and resources in making sure. Journalists’ deadlines generally call for an instinctive approach to expressing ideas, and in any case, empirical communications research is certainly not part of their job description. Nor do social and physical scientists typically see communication as a critical part of their mission. In effect, one of the impor-

tant roles for nonprofits is to serve as *translators*—finding effective ways of expressing expert findings in forms that journalists can disseminate for the purpose of true public information.

### The Place of Explanation in Communications

This article has focused on explanation as one of the chief purposes of nonprofit communication, and now it will be helpful to place this approach in a somewhat broader context.

**A complement to moral and emotional appeals.** Explanation is certainly not a replacement for appeals to “do the right thing,” but rather a critical complement to it. It is right to help suffering children, to make sure that all Americans have access to healthcare, to prevent the unnecessary extinction of species—and it is both appropriate and effective (to an extent) to make moral appeals on behalf of these causes. But explanation is a dimension of communication that is often given much less attention, with the result that additional sources and dimensions of motivation are left untapped (not to mention the fact that democratic public discourse is also being diminished).

Organizations have also been told that they must appeal to potential funders and supporters by tapping into people’s pity, fear, or guilt, by putting a (pathetic) “face” on an issue, and so forth. In fact, many advocates recognize at some point in the history of their issue that this approach can produce early success but then lead to a “dead end,” as sympathy and altruism are tapped out, or problems begin to seem overwhelming. Once again, a lack of understanding can essentially put a ceiling on how far support will go.

**A counterbalance to personal responsibility.** Importantly, explanations help advocates overcome one of the chief obstacles they typically face—the idea that all problems can be solved by (or are caused by lack of) *personal responsibility*. People in poverty can “work harder to get out of poverty.” People without health insurance should “earn more so they can afford decent coverage.” Child abuse would stop if “bad parents would learn to control themselves.” Racial disparities (if they exist at all) “are the fault of minorities who blame everyone but themselves for their problems.” The emphasis on individual responsibility is characteristic of American thinking in general, but is also pro-

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moted by an advertising culture that encourages people to think like individual consumers, as well as by some conservative communicators, who put a near-exclusive emphasis on individual responsibility for either ideological or strategic reasons. (This position obscures the role of corporate responsibility, for instance.) Overall, nonprofits working to make change are often fighting uphill against patterns of thinking that are very easy for people to fall into. *This is all the more reason why nonprofits must work hard to provide explanations that effectively open people’s eyes to the big picture.*

**Explanation and “framing.”** Explanation is only one aspect of effective communications that nonprofits produce in order to create progress on their issues and an informed environment for democratic deliberation. There are various other critical aspects of communication that complement and reinforce effective explanation, such as the careful choice of messengers (e.g., businesspeople who can credibly explain the practical value of a particular after-school program); association of an issue with the core values it relates to; emphasis on available, effective solutions, rather than just problems and

“symptoms”; expansion of the scope of any issue beyond affected individuals to the community context; and so forth. (See the FrameWorks Institute’s Web site [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org) for discussion of a comprehensive, empirically based, interdisciplinary approach to strategic framing as a whole). Within this broader picture of communications, effective explanation is one key component that works in tandem with all the others.

### Conclusion

Nonprofits work on the hard issues—the ones where progress is difficult by definition, or there wouldn’t be organizations devoted to working on them. These are also the kinds of issues for which we need democracy, where collective action or informed pressure on policymakers can yield positive outcomes for many citizens and for society as a whole. But in order for the democratic process to function as it supposed to on difficult issues, explanations are critical. And nonprofits have a special opportunity, and responsibility, to help provide them. In effect, it is often up to nonprofit communicators to “teach” the issues of the day.

Does [the organization's Web site] assume that anyone worth reaching already "gets it"?

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As one important indicator of the current place of explanation in an organization's communications approach, we suggest a simple test: Examine the organization's Web site. Does it offer an explanation of the core ideas at the heart of the issue? Or does it assume that anyone worth reaching already "gets it"? If an organization works on "community reinvestment," on "single-payer" health coverage, or "food security," does the site explain what the term means, for the benefit of the many individuals who might be helpful to the cause but who do not fully understand the phrase? Here are some other basic questions:

If there is an explanation, is it effective (and what evidence might there be about this)?

How prominently is the explanation placed? Is it "buried" in a late paragraph or a deep, internal link?

Answers to these questions say something important about how an organization sees its role—and the role of an informed public—in a democratic society.

**Endnotes**

1. Here and elsewhere throughout the article, we refer

to findings from research conducted by Cultural Logic on behalf of various nonprofit organizations across the country, usually in partnership with the FrameWorks Institute.

2. Iyengar, Shanto. *Is Anyone Responsible?: How Television Frames Political Issues*. 1991. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

3. Many of the examples of effective and ineffective communication in this section are drawn from our own work with nonprofit organizations throughout the country (often in partnership with the FrameWorks Institute). We offer no identifying information about the organizations in these cases, which are not intended as individual critiques but rather as illustrations of widespread patterns in advocacy.

4. In fact, Cultural Logic researchers were startled to find, in conversations with hundreds of Americans about global warming, how many mentioned CFCs specifically (even if erroneously) in connection with the issue.

**Let's Talk!**

Let's move this topic forward! Any ideas or arguments you'd like to share with the authors and editors? Send us an email, referring to this article at: [feedback@nonprofitquarterly.org](mailto:feedback@nonprofitquarterly.org).