

BEING HEARD

COMPANION
TOOLKIT

AUGUST 2017



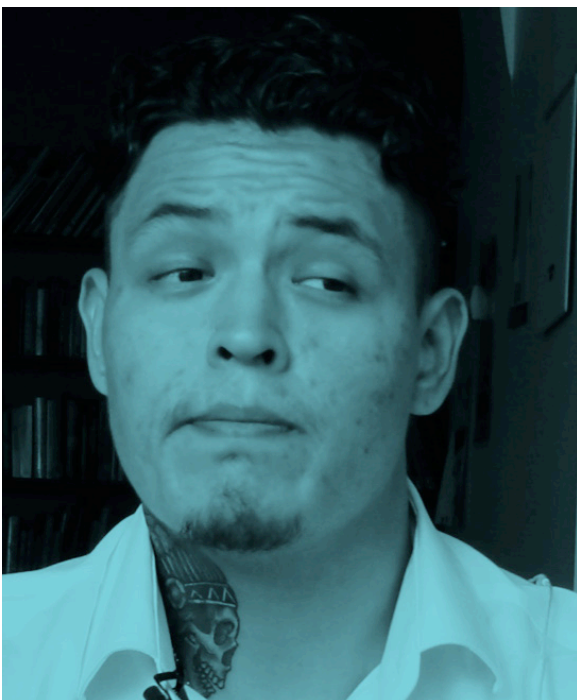


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INTRODUCTION

Over the past year, Topos listened to the voices of marginalized groups who often are not heard – by elected leaders, by the media, even by public opinion researchers. We went to the streets of inner-city Baltimore, Oakland, and New Orleans, where we heard from people who felt neglected and often invisible when they reflected on the role of government and the public sector in their lives and communities. The intersection of race, gender and class was at the core of this investigation, so we centered our conversations on lower-income African Americans and Latinos (citizen, documented, and undocumented immigrants), with an emphasis on lower-income women of color and people of color who are LGBTQ, in particular those who are gender non-conforming.

The *Being Heard: Voices from Marginalized Communities Companion Toolkit* that follows is intended to help communicators and organizers understand research-based strategies for engaging marginalized communities in collective action, with the belief that mobilized communities across socioeconomic and demographic spectrums have the power to shape public policy, systems and structures. The examples that follow are intended to help policymakers, foundations, and non-profits either working in, or planning to work in this space, understand the strategy that emerged from Topos research, and to spark ideas on how to communicate more effectively with these marginalized groups.

KEEP IN MIND

Marginalized people of color have lived experiences that reinforce powerlessness when it comes to public policies and systems:

- Neglected neighborhoods
- Lack of resources
- A hostile political environment (transgender military ban, anti-immigrant rhetoric and actions, etc.)

At the same time, most hold onto the belief that voting matters and people can effect change.

People easily default to Individual Responsibility to explain why things are the way they are, for example:

- Community conditions are because people don't take care of things.
- Violence is due to parents not raising their children well.
- Bad cops need to be replaced with cops who care.

But the influence of systems and structures are sometimes visible and can be quickly brought into focus.

We need to be sensitive to people's already stressful lives.

- A solutions-orientation is more empowering than emphasizing problems.
- Starting with tangible benefits before linking to broader policies and systems allows community members to see a path forward.
- A specific call to action models behavior, and helps people to understand their role in social change.
- Stories of successful collective action led by marginalized people illustrates they too have power and that their time won't be wasted.

FRAMING DO'S AND DON'TS

Do's	Dont's
Orient toward the solution, the objective to achieve	Focus solely on the problem
Explain how conditions, systems, and structures create disparities amongst racial and/or socioeconomic groups	Reinforce the notion that "individual responsibility" is the problem or the solution
Emphasize positive changes or goals	Only react to negative events
Share success stories to build confidence that change can happen	Only focus on needs, problems, threats
Start with tangible solutions before connecting to policies to advance or systems to fix	Start with big systemic challenges, or impersonal policies
Make policies visible as the vehicle for change that outlasts specific elected leaders	Equate "government" with "politician"
Reinforce the power of collective action, meaning, government is "us"	Frame government as "them" or as elected leaders, which reinforces a distant, elite ruling class
Include calls to actions with specific steps, like "one or two steps beyond voting" or "Voting Plus One"	Rely on vague calls to "use your voice"
Include "Unity" as a desired goal and powerful value	Make empty calls for unity with no action steps, or imply that unity is the end-all, be-all for bringing about positive change
Use "potential" as a value-laden way to talk about community rebuilding and community power	Focus only on what's broken or wrong

TALKING POINTS

Keep in mind the goal is to empower marginalized people into collective action. The talking points that follow are suggestions on how to approach stories in ways that incite a greater understanding of, and belief in, people's untapped power.

Show the path forward by orienting the conversation around solutions, not problems. When possible, start with a tangible benefit before connecting to the policy or broader system in play.

We can keep more families in their home when times get tough. [tangible benefit] Right now, we're working to make eviction rules fairer so that... [policy] Over time, solutions like this bring more stability to our community. [system goal]

We're going to the City Council to tell them we need to renovate our community center and identify creative ways to expand programming. [tangible benefit] Providing our kids with positive things to do will do a lot to keep kids out of trouble and prevent crime. These community improvements will mean less need for police; we can shift just x% of the funds used for policing now, and have more than enough to fund the community center in full. [policy]

It's time we had real food in this community, not just corner convenience stores. That's why we're working together with the XYZ Council to bring a farmers' market to our neighborhood. [tangible benefit] It's just one step in making our community healthier. [system goal]

Tell stories of successful collective action to empower, inspire, and motivate continued action.

AnyCity saw crime plummet in one year by putting a new solution in place. Community leaders worked alongside the police department in training for at-risk youth designed to model non-violent responses. It worked. Young people are taking a different path, and the community is a safer and healthier place to be. It's one big step toward tackling the disparities that hold us all back.

It may seem like a small thing, but for gender non-conforming people it's a big victory. Thanks to an active community effort, high schools in AnyCounty now allow students access to whichever bathroom represents their gender identity. Daily humiliation and bathroom monitoring by staff are a thing of the past, and increasing cultural acceptance will hopefully follow.

TALKING POINTS continued

Ground the conversation in marginalized groups; do not hide from race or class or other marginalized identities. Encourage all community voices to participate. People in a given community (geographic area or identity-based community) should lead the storytelling. Too often, marginalized people are included only as victims, not as change makers.

We are all better off, our democracy is healthier, when more people participate. But rules differ state to state, and in this state, we have one of the lowest turnout rates in the nation, in part because we have rules that prevent people like me from voting. I did my time; I paid my debt. How dare anyone be able to take my vote, my voice, away? Just like our ancestors, we can take steps for the black community, our voice, our power, to be truly heard and felt. We can fully participate in determining the people, laws and policies that govern our society. One in 10 people here, in this city, will be full citizens again, if we block the rule that has silenced us.

Make specific calls to action, not just vague assertions to “use your voice.”

Voting is important. But to really make a difference, each of us needs to take steps beyond voting. For some people that means showing up at a rally, for others it means speaking up at a meeting or talking with neighbors about solutions. There are lots of ways you can make a difference.

Include mention of the “community’s potential,” a powerful ideal.

We have so much potential in our community! We have children who dream of great things. We have people who work hard for their families every day. We have potential, and it’s time to make sure everyone knows that we deserve more and won’t be ignored. If the community had the needed investments from the public sector, we would soar to meet our potential.

QUOTES

Quotes are designed to concisely and artfully convey a key idea or key elements. They are useful for press releases, speeches, or to use in media interviews. We've included a few sample quotes to spark your thinking.

Our neighbors, cousins, and fellow community members should not have a wedge driven between us. People are working, paying taxes, and contributing to our communities. Everybody has a voice, and we all have a role in shaping what Louisiana looks like. Norris Henderson, Executive Director of VOTE, Advancement Project

In the above quote, Norris Henderson makes a powerful plea for unity that extends to collective action in shaping public policy.

We can't just hope the people we elect will do enough for us. To pass the Community Reinvestment Plan, we need to take steps beyond voting by writing letters, holding meetings, and talking with elected officials. When we stand together, our community has power. We want people to know there's talent here, there's love here, there's power here. For too long, elected officials ignored our community, cut funding, and everything decayed. Now, this is the start of bringing things back.

This quote demonstrates the idea of "taking one or two steps beyond voting," to engage with the community year-round. People get excited by the concept and practice of grassroots organizing, and are invested in the idea that grassroots organizing and communities coming together to make change can/should happen and can/should exist all the time. A particularly important benefit for people of color in marginalized communities is that it brings people closer (promotes unity), where the formation of community and strengthening of social ties is an end in and of itself.

Communities thrive with solid foundations like great schools, safe parks, good jobs; when we don't invest in those things, neighborhoods begin to crumble and people struggle to meet their potential. Ensuring opportunities exist for all will do more to save lives and better our community than police and jails. If we come together and take steps beyond voting, we can achieve X just like Y community did.

The above quote: 1) tells the story of a community (not just individuals) through a value-based lens – "opportunity" and "potential"; 2) paints a holistic picture of what is needed for a thriving community; 3) emphasizes lack of resources; 4) empowers people an example of successful collective action.

Our community has so much potential. To reach our potential, we need common sense solutions. We need activities for our kids, that's why we support after-school programs in partnership with University of X; more jobs and job training opportunities so people don't have to rely on the street economy, that's why we're working for a tax incentive program that rewards small businesses that hire from Community College Y's job training program; a place for us to all come together, that's why we've gotten the local nonprofit to donate a joint gathering space for organizing and events. We can do this; we can shift \$X from policing, encourage private donations and leverage additional resources to do all this and more. They did it in X community; we can do it here.

This quote begins with the community's potential, which is a motivating value. The quote then illustrates a range of specific solutions. The reference to police is an example for how to avoid the Safety Frame and call for reinvestment of resources.

QUOTES

continued

Additional brief quotes illustrating aspects of the strategy.

Opportunity and Potential

Together, we can get public officials to recognize our potential, and bring more opportunity to our community.

Every community needs certain things to thrive, like good schools and parks. And that means public investment.

Potential + Investment = Success

We have the vision+power+solution to make our community thrive.

Unity and Community

Government works best when people speak loudest.

People speaking together for what our community needs – that's democracy.

The best cure for community neglect is a big dose of community voice.

Everybody contributes, we all play a role, we are stronger when we are united.

Successful Collective Action

You may not hear about it on the news, but people like us are coming together and making a difference every day. For example...

We know what the problems are, let's look to the solutions. AnyCity came together to do X and now have Y. We can do it too.

Respecting traditions and teaching our children how our forebears fought for the right to vote, can inspire the next generation to tap into their power for change.

Just like our ancestors, we can take steps for the black community, so our voice, our power, will be truly heard and felt. We can take steps beyond voting, and fully participate in determining the people, laws and policies that govern our society.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

Sometimes communicators are in a position to have an extended conversation with a group. Unlike quotes, which are intended to artfully convey a particular idea, conversation starters are designed to put people in the right frame of mind to consider the key ideas we'd like to advance. Think of these questions as "triggers" for a substantive conversation rather than illustrations of the complete message.

General Questions to Ask

Everyone must be invested in building more equitable and inclusive communities. How can we bring public investment into our communities so we can tap into our community's potential?

Instead of thinking solely about all the problems we have in the community, what if we thought about the solutions (and assets) we need to tap into our community's potential, and then come together to gain those resources?

We all know the ingredients of a great community, right? What are they? Schools with good teachers, well-maintained roads, safe streets, access to high quality healthcare—investments in these critical foundations make communities thrive. Are our policies working to help our communities build these foundations? What are the steps, beyond voting, to make sure our communities have them?

ASK "WHY?" APPROXIMATELY FIVE TIMES

Thinking about root causes of disparity in simple terms can help communities, activists, and communicators understand the structural issues at play behind disparities. Here's a sample exercise adapted from the Center for Social Inclusion (CSI).

Start with a disparity: "Communities of color are less likely to bike."

Then, ask "why?"

Respond.

Then ask again until you've asked approximately five times.

By asking "why?" repeatedly we can go beyond cultural, individual-based explanations and start to unearth the root causes of the disparity.

Visioning "Safety" Exercise

Communities, activists, and communicators seeking to shift resources from policing to other community strategies may find themselves trapped in a Safety Frame that inadvertently builds support for more police. However, when conversations shift to investment, people readily imagine an agenda that would result in healthier, stronger communities with less reliance on police. Here's a sample exercise created and used by Dante Barry, Executive Director of Million Hoodies, to help communities start to shift the conversation to investment.

Ask your audience to imagine what makes them feel safe. Tell them to close their eyes and think about what's around them, who they are with, what it feels like, etc.

Then ask everyone to open their eyes and raise their hand if police, prisons, deportation centers came into their thinking at all. (More often than not, your audience will keep their hands down)

Then ask them if having a job, affordable housing, healthcare, etc. comes to mind when they are thinking about what makes them feel safe. (You may notice that almost immediately people raise their hands.)

BEFORE AND AFTER

Being able to effectively communicate the key insights in this document are vital to strengthening engagement. There are infinite ways to artfully communicate elements of the strategy. Sometimes the best way to see the difference a strategy makes is to compare an original idea with a revised approach.

For example, the following approach on the left is good, but it also frames the issue on an individual basis, while the approach on the right takes a more structural, explanatory approach.

Nice, but limited focus	A broader, more explanatory picture
<p>When we fail to do everything we can to help every child thrive, we could be turning our backs on someone who will cure cancer, a future president, or a writer who will inspire millions. People are our most important resource, and we can't afford to write off anyone.</p>	<p>Communities thrive with solid foundations like great schools, safe parks, good jobs; when we don't invest in those things, neighborhoods begin to crumble and people struggle to meet their potential. Community centers and opportunities will do more to save lives than police and jails. If we come together and take steps beyond voting, we can achieve X just like Y community did.</p>

For example, the following approach on the left is good, but it also frames the issue on an individual basis, while the approach on the right takes a more structural, explanatory approach.

Narrow focus on police	A more holistic approach
<p>Drugs and violence are too entrenched in our community; women don't feel safe to go out at night. We need action. But instead of focusing on crime, cops harass people who aren't doing anything wrong. We need better trained police, police from our community, police who care.</p>	<p>Communities thrive with solid foundations like great schools, safe parks, good jobs; when we don't invest in those things, neighborhoods begin to crumble and people struggle to meet their potential. Community centers and opportunities will do more to save lives than police and jails. If we come together and take steps beyond voting, we can achieve X just like Y community did.</p>

BEFORE AND AFTER continued

The following example is from an actual blog (we've masked the city). It discusses the need to rethink policy in terms of public health and public safety, and is a good example of how citizen action can be used to build confidence that change can happen. However, it misses several opportunities to tell a more powerful solutions-oriented story, that connects tangible individual and community benefits, to policy, and to broader systemic goals.

Original	Revised
<p>...Too many times, unfortunately, the answers to these questions show that we are missing an opportunity for rehabilitation, and as a result, overburdening our jails with people who cycle through them. In some jurisdictions, however, local leaders are rethinking how to improve both public health and public safety. In CITY, STATE, the police chief, NAME, made an announcement that "any addict who walks into the police station with the remainder of their drug equipment (needles, etc.) or drugs and asks for help will NOT be charged. Instead we will walk them through the system toward detox and recovery." In STATE, a proposed bill would create a local-state partnership to assign low-level offenders struggling with addiction to community-based treatment and support instead of jail or prison. These are better solutions to addiction.</p>	<p>We have better solutions to addiction; it's time to make them happen. The people of AnyCity are rethinking how to improve both public health and public safety. "Instead of cycling people through our jails over and over, we can change our policies and start treating addiction as a health issue, rather than a criminal issue. Instead of charging people with a crime, we'll walk them through the system to detox and recovery," said Reverend NAME, one of several people in the community advocating for change. A proposed bill would create a local-state partnership to assign low-level offenders struggling with addiction to community-based treatment and support instead of jail or prison. "This is one of many things we can do together, to unify our community and make it stronger," said NAME.</p>

BEFORE AND AFTER continued

This example is from a news interview highlighting a program that hires former prison inmates to plant trees, helping to rejuvenate some of the city's poorest neighborhoods. The head of field operations spent several years in prison. He tells the host how planting urban trees is turning lives around and remaking the city. While the interview does highlight the concepts of unity and empowerment, with minor changes, the before and answer responses show how certain concepts can be emphasized and brought more to the surface.

Original	Revised
<p>HOST: How do people in the community respond to the work that you're doing now, planting trees?</p> <p>RESPONSE: For the most part, we definitely have community support. It is not just the people who are seeking employment or are interested in that way. It is just from normal, everyday people who just like to see trees, like to see people working...</p>	<p>HOST: How do people in the community respond to the work that you're doing now, planting trees?</p> <p>RESPONSE: For the most part, we definitely have community support. It is not just the people who are seeking employment or are interested in that way. It is just from normal, everyday people who just like to see trees and like how it improves the look of the neighborhood, like to see people who are from these communities working, and coming together to change things...We're bringing people together to plant trees all over the city.</p>

ONLINE ENGAGEMENT

Social media is a very useful, if sometimes challenging, medium for communicating insightful perspectives on policy. One place to look for hashtags includes: <http://hashtagify.me>.

Here are some examples of ways to convey some of the essential ideas presented in this toolkit in a few words.

Currently Used Hashtags:

#collectiveaction
#community
#communityengagement
#communityvoice
#empowerment
#unity
#communityunity
#unity
#bringitback
#changeispossible
#solutions
#hope

Sample Hashtags: Note: the following hashtags are illustrations and have not been vetted for past use.

#unity4community
#communityrespect
#opportunitynow
#unitynow
#communityrising
#voicesbeyondvotes
#unityreigns
#Xcitypoweringchange
#investincommunities
#tapthatpotential
#showourpotential
#showeringpotential
#PowertoUnite
#empowercommunityvoices
#moreinvestment
#beyondvoting
#governmentinourhands
#democracyisus
#governmentisus
#VisionPowerSolutions

ONLINE ENGAGEMENT continued

Sample Social Media posts: The following sample social media posts are intended to spark ideas on how to utilize the strategy included in this toolkit. For various issues, we include an example for Facebook posting, and two tweets on the same issue.

Facebook	Twitter Variation	Twitter Variation
<p>Victory! Stand with the City Council in celebrating the worth of every person. Some seek to divide, but we won't have a wedge driven between us. We all contribute, we all have a role, and our community is stronger when we are united. Stand with immigrants, stand with dreamers. #Sanctuary</p>	<p>Everybody has a voice. Hundreds of #DACA supporters unite 2nite. Our voices have been heard. Together, let's break the internet joining #DREAMers. #showup</p>	<p>Take a step or two beyond voting – write your city councilperson, show up to tonight's rally, talk to your friends. We are one community. #Sanctuary</p>
<p>This neighborhood has potential. The people here have heart and good ideas. We're coming together to demand more public investment – more programs for our kids, more jobs, better maintained streets – so our potential can be realized.</p>	<p>Neighborhoods have potential. People have ideas. Hear our voice. Invest in our potential. #communityvoice</p>	<p>We know what we need. Speak up for our Community Reinvestment plan! #TapPotential #ChangeisComing</p>
<p>AnyCity Tree Trust rejuvenates some of the city's poorest neighborhoods by tapping into the potential of former prison inmates. AnyCity TT is more than trees – it's jobs for those on the margins of society, it's beauty in neglected corners of our city, and it's smiles on the faces of people who love to care for their new tree.</p>	<p>AnyCity Tree Trust – from prison inmate to master gardener, bringing new life and jobs to AnyCity. #Solutions #Unity</p>	<p>New life blossoms as elms return to Elm Street. #Solutions #AnyCityTreeTrust</p>
<p>Former gang members, now committed to non-violence, are showing others how to respond without violence. Investing in people goes further than investing in more police.</p>	<p>Violent crime down 60% in one year! #SmartSolutions</p>	<p>Look what they did! (link) #communityunity #InvestinUs #VisionPowerSolutions</p>

ONLINE ENGAGEMENT continued

Facebook	Twitter Variation	Twitter Variation
<p>Unity means making sure every community has the resources to survive and rebuild after a natural disaster. Coming together, creating solutions, keep us safe.</p>	<p>AnyName shares how communities show up for each other in crisis. (link) #WeKeepUsSafe #Unity #Solutions</p>	<p>Together in crisis, and together in rebuilding EVERY neighborhood. #communityrising</p>
<p>As the journey to the Supreme Court begins to appeal the immigration bans, how do we prepare? How do we practice solidarity and unity? Find out how NAME came together to successfully pass an ordinance to fight registries. We can do so in our community too.</p>	<p>Success in solidarity – learn how. (link)</p>	<p>From AnyCity to the nation – how communities are defeating anti-immigrant actions. (link)</p>

ABOUT TOPOS

Topos has as its mission to explore and ultimately *transform the landscape of public understanding* where public interest issues play out. Our approach is based on the premise that while it is possible to achieve short-term victories on issues through a variety of strategies, real change depends on a fundamental shift in public understanding. Topos was created to bring together the range of expertise needed to understand existing issue dynamics, explore possibilities for creating new issue understanding, develop a proven course of action, and arm advocates with new communications tools to win support.

For more information: www.topospartnership.com

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