

"Americans believe in the reality of 'race' as a defined, indubitable feature of the natural world. Racism—the need to ascribe bone-deep features to people and then humiliate, reduce, and destroy them—inevitably follows from this inalterable condition. In this way, racism is rendered as the innocent daughter of Mother Nature, and one is left to deplore the Middle Passage or Trail of Tears the way one deplores an earthquake, a tornado, or any other phenomenon that can be cast as beyond the handiwork of men." Ta-Nehisi Coates

TWO NARRATIVE STRATEGIES ENGAGING ON RACE

INTRODUCTION **DIFFERENT GOALS, DIFFERENT APPROACHES**

For those who use communication as a tool for creating change and progress, racism presents perhaps the deepest challenge in American life. Audiences bring their own complex—and often hidden or even subconscious—perspectives to the interaction. Communicators themselves may have a range of different feelings, goals, priorities and motivations. The topics to be addressed are as multifaceted as American life itself, and range across every sphere, including our justice and public safety systems, our patterns of work and housing, our leisure and entertainment choices, our political processes, our schools and hospitals.

As daunting as the challenges are, committed communicators across the country are working hard to address racism in order to create progress. Until we find effective ways to get through to audiences and build commitment to change, we will continue to suffer as a country from injustices and inequalities that threaten lives and livelihoods, as well as tensions and divisions that threaten our social fabric and democratic processes.

From the Topos perspective, based on years of work across a wide range of public interest topics, a key point for communicators to keep in mind is that on a challenge as deeply rooted and complex as racism, multiple strategies are necessary. *Different goals require different approaches*: Defeating cynical, “dog-whistle” candidates, energizing a political base, changing the practices of doctors or teachers, promoting public investment in neglected (or actively excluded) communities, advancing a race-forward policy agenda, decreasing race-based distrust between different population groups, transforming the culture to tackle injustice—varied objectives like these cannot be met with just one or two narrative approaches. While there are commonalities and best practices, communicators in particular contexts need tailored strategies to be most powerful.

A number of researchers, scholars and practitioners around the country have done great work identifying helpful strategies for different objectives. To name just a few:

- ▶ When the objective is to confront personal racism, work by the [Kirwan Institute](#) and others is creating awareness of Implicit Bias, and some are finding a “calling in” strategy to be more effective than “calling out.”¹

- ▶ When the objective is to defeat dog whistles and promote support for candidates who will enact more progressive economic policies, a Strategic Racism frame can be useful. The Race-Class Narrative developed by Demos which highlights a Strategic Racism frame has been effectively deployed to defeat candidates who use dog whistles.² Similarly, research by Topos over a decade ago found significant power in a Strategic Racism frame that points out how corporations benefit from stoking anti-immigrant attitudes because it keeps immigrants in the shadows, vulnerable to wage theft and exploitation, driving wages down for everyone.
- ▶ When the objective is to combat “othering” and put into practice policies that advance “belonging,” a targeted universalism approach, as advanced by John Powell and the [Othering and Belonging Institute](#) at UC Berkeley, is a much-needed framework.

To this body of work, we add two additional research-based approaches³ designed to advance a policy agenda centered on the well-being of people of color. One approach is geared primarily toward engaging White audiences, while the other is mainly designed for empowering Black and Brown communities.

¹ See the following link for one example of discussion and explanation of these distinct stances: http://www.racialequityvtne.org/wp-content/uploads/09/2018/Interrupting-Bias_-Calling-Out-vs.-Calling-In-REVISED-Aug1-2018-.pdf.
² The Race-Class Narrative (RCN) was developed by Demos (Project Principals: Anat Shenker-Osorio, Ian Haney-López, and Heather McGhee) in collaboration with Lake Research Partners and Brilliant Corners: Research & Strategies.
³ This overview is based on years of Topos research and experience with a broad, national cross-section of Americans—including low-income Black and Latinx audiences—consisting of ethnography, small group discussions, survey and expert interviews, as well as specific research with Kansas Action for Children that included cognitive elicitations, small group discussions and TalkBack Testing with hundreds of (mostly White) Kansans.

PROMOTING HELPFUL POLICY **WITH RACE-EXPLICIT NARRATIVES**

The specific objective for the work we report on here is to promote policies to advance the well-being of Black and Brown people—while centering race, not avoiding it.

Every day, advocates around the nation are working to advance solutions that will address disparities, dismantle structural racism, and improve people's lives. And these communicators often find themselves struggling with problematic strategic choices:

- ▶ Do we mobilize Black and Brown communities or focus on White people?
- ▶ Do we make the campaign “about” race explicitly or do we make it about “everyone”?
- ▶ Do we have distinctly different messages for different audiences?
- ▶ And so on.

These kinds of campaign questions may actually present false choices. For example, in any state with a very high percentage of White voters, winning requires engaging them, and also mobilizing Black and Brown voters. Similarly, a campaign “about race” may also be a campaign “about everyone.”

To those ends, the two strategies that follow are designed to address two different challenges with complementary strategies. In brief:

1. A barrier to policy support for some White people is a Cycle of Race Dismissiveness that prevents them from even listening to a policy conversation on race; so breaking through that Cycle is key to success.
2. A barrier to civic engagement for some Black and Brown people is cynicism that change is possible; so stories of successful collective action by and for Black and Brown communities is key to success.

For communications, there is no downside to each audience being exposed to the other's message in the recommendations that follow, and in fact the two complement each other.

STRATEGY BUILDING SUPPORT AMONG WHITE AUDIENCES BY ADDRESSING THE VICIOUS CYCLE OF RACE DISMISSIVENESS

Broadly speaking, we can divide Americans into three groups in terms of their default attitudes and receptiveness when it comes to topics related to race.

Race-Attentive: those who think often about these topics, recognize the deep ways that race impacts people’s lives and life chances, and know that we could be doing more to address race-based challenges. They welcome a constructive conversation and are already paying attention, though they are not always on board with progressive policies related to race.

Racists: those with explicitly racist views, who are unlikely to be moved by any broad-based communications strategy.

Race-Dismissive: those who reject most conversations about race as unnecessary and think claims about race-based obstacles and disparities are exaggerated. While not *consciously* hostile towards Black and Brown people—and often even sympathetic and well-meaning—their resentment toward people who “play the race card” is a major obstacle to progress. Those who are Race-Dismissive tend to be White, though some Black and Brown people fall into this category as well.⁴

Building the broad-based support needed for lasting policy change, especially in states with a high percentage of White residents, requires reaching those who are currently Race-Dismissive and starting them on a transformation to becoming Race-Attentive. Our research shows that they can be moved, but that mishandled communications reinforce their problematic attitudes, through what we call the Vicious Cycle of Race Dismissiveness.



⁴ Note that these attitudinal categories do not line up neatly with political ones. Many self-identified “progressives” fall into the race-dismissive category, for instance.

Race-Dismissive Americans are oblivious to broadly familiar and uncontroversial facts and dynamics related to racial bias, discrimination and systemic obstacles. This obliviousness makes it more likely they will bring an Individual rather than Systemic Perspective to the topic—seeing people of color as solely responsible for their situation, resenting being made to feel “guilty” or responsible, and suspecting the motives of anyone who brings up the topic. In turn, this negativity reinforces their seeming unwillingness to hear, understand or take in basic information. Put simply, if you don't know, you're not going to engage, and if you don't feel engaged, you're not going to listen or learn.

The entire dynamic is supported by two fundamental threads in American culture. First, a strong emphasis on personal responsibility: You're on your own and create your own chances. And second, a pervasive and well-documented pattern of implicit bias that causes people to unconsciously attribute negative qualities to people of color.

The resulting vicious cycle is stubborn and deeply ingrained, and has important implications for communicators.

- ▶ Race-Dismissive audiences ignore communications about race.
- ▶ They often miss the significance of the topic because they don't share the premises underlying the communications.
- ▶ Most importantly: *Approaches that focus on proving the extent of race-based disparities, or on explaining Whites' responsibility to address systemic racism, actually backfire by reinforcing the vicious cycle, causing Race-Dismissive audiences to dig in their heels and learn nothing.*

Note that this cycle is not about clearly racist behavior, which Race-Dismissive people reject. Identifying racist behavior must be done and this strategy doesn't conflict with that. Instead, this cycle is about advocates' ongoing communications that try to bring

attention to race. A Race-Dismissive mindset prevents people from taking in information and connecting the dots in ways that could broaden their awareness related to race and racism.

So how can communicators break through, to start people on a learning journey—and more immediately, to create a constructive dialog about new policy approaches?

We find there are three elements to an approach that can accomplish these goals and create a new, engaged kind of conversation about race and policy.

Create a way to identify

The most distinctive recommendation from the recent research, and the most effective way to quickly break out of the vicious cycle is to position race-related obstacles as experiences that Race-Dismissive people can relate to and understand, rather than reject and dismiss.

As others have observed, White people do not tend to see race as an identity that has shaped and benefitted their experience in a variety of ways. Therefore, expressing, explicitly or implicitly, that race is a unifying experience or one that influences life outcomes, often makes little sense to them.

We create a way for Race-Dismissive people to identify by getting them to consider a variety of experiences they may have less trouble relating to—advanced age, disability, isolation, and so forth. In this context, race-based challenges are recognized as legitimate, common-sense concerns that can and should be addressed. When we get people to see the world from this perspective, even Race-Dismissive individuals are inclined to listen and learn.

Many Americans face “segment challenges”—hardships specific to a particular group and that others may find it hard to relate to. For instance...

Of course, the challenges other groups face may not be similar in kind or scale to those based on race—though some, e.g. related to disability, can be life-threatening. (See further illustrations in a later section.) Nonetheless, this framing—highlighting challenges audiences can easily grasp and relate to—promotes understanding, inoculates against resentment about racial matters “getting all the attention,” and even creates empathy about race-related challenges audiences had seemed oblivious to. This perspective shift goes a step farther than appeals to unity, common ground or even common humanity which, while beneficial, still allow people to maintain their distinct differences rather than walk in another person’s shoes.

Highlight eye-opening obstacles

In the context of challenges faced by various groups, audiences are open to hearing about the challenges Black and Brown people face.

Importantly, these challenges should not focus on disparities in outcomes (e.g. different life expectancies, levels of wealth, educational attainment), which Race-Dismissive individuals tend to rationalize in negative ways. Instead, they should be about *barriers that prevent success and well-being*.

These examples (particularly, those mentioned first) should sound addressable, and not so daunting or unfixable that they lead to fatalism, a sense that things will never change.

When embedded in the context of challenges faced by various groups, well-chosen examples help people to see the challenges faced by Black and Brown people as having nothing to do with personal choices. They connect the dots for Race-Dismissive people in ways that allow systems, structures and patterns to become visible.

Importantly, in presenting these obstacles, it is best to avoid an accusatory tone, which according to many studies leads to defensiveness and pushback (and is therefore likely to retrigger the cycle of dismissiveness).

Like the first element discussed, this one does not, by itself, break through the Cycle of Dismissiveness. Instead we need to include a third element, discussed next.

Orient toward proven solutions

Topos work consistently demonstrates that audiences are engaged by concrete, realistic solutions—not just discussions of problems.

Even aside from the particular policies that a given communicator may be trying to promote, it is helpful to clarify that there are effective steps we can take—as individuals, as a community, as a state, etc.—to reduce unnecessary barriers and challenges. For instance: *A program in Washington, DC that trains prenatal caregivers to help with stress-related health challenges faced by Black moms has led to higher, more normal birth weights for their babies.*

In addition to tapping into motivation around problem-solving, getting things done, and making the world better, examples like these aid understanding by helping further clarify the problematic dynamics that need to be addressed.

Note that this third element, orienting toward proven solutions, is sometimes enough on its own to build support for effective policies, but does not, on its own, bring race into focus. Those who want to leverage policy conversations to promote conversations on race and racial justice will find all three elements in this recommendation necessary.

Putting it all Together

Communicators will find there are numerous ways to bring these three elements together. Here's just one example:

[Context of other challenges] *A “segment challenge” is what experts call a hardship faced by a particular group—one that other people may find hard to relate to. People can often get by despite the challenges their group faces—elderly, isolated, disabled, low-income, etc.—but there are also things we can do together to make it easier. For instance, senior citizens often face bankruptcy due to serious, unexpected medical expenses—so we can do more to see that they have access to affordable care.*

[Concrete obstacle related to race] *And studies show that White doctors spend fewer minutes talking to Black patients—*

[Proven solutions] *but training is effective in addressing these problems so that everyone gets good treatment. Trainings for prenatal caregivers to help with stress-related health challenges faced by Black moms has also led to higher, more normal birth weights for babies.*

Examples like these lead Race-Dismissive people to pay attention:

“I am sort of shocked that Black patients are talked to less at doctor visits. Seems like such a small and simple thing, but I’m sure they are hugely impacted by simple things like this all the time and we are too ignorant or busy to catch on and understand.”
(25-year-old conservative White woman)

“It is not society’s responsibility to create equality for all. But society should increase opportunities for segments who are discriminated against.”
(72-year-old conservative White woman)

“We need to help one another. We need to get involved with removing challenges for all people.”
(71-year-old conservative White man)

“Everyone who claims to be a functioning member of society should find this relevant to make us more aware of what really goes on. And as a woman I know that, intentional or not, many of us “segment” people without really knowing a person.”
(34-year-old moderate White woman)

STRATEGY **EMPOWERING BLACK AND BROWN COMMUNITIES BY OVERCOMING HOPELESSNESS**

Life is hard—and getting harder for historically disenfranchised communities in the US. No stranger to government neglect and oppression, those who live in Black and Brown communities often see increasing levels of decay and violence in their daily lives, along with shrinking opportunity. Many Americans are frustrated by government inaction or by decisions they disagree with, but in particularly marginalized communities the painful consequences of that inaction, or even hostile action, are sharp and apparent.

Government could and should do more, particularly according to those who live in low-income Black and Brown communities. They see what other communities have available to them, and know that resources exist. Some are so pessimistic and discouraged by the weight of the neglectful and oppressive systems that affect their lives that they have given up on any notion of change.

In this context, appeals to “make their voice heard” can easily fall flat when their lived experience shows that those in power don’t listen to them. And dialing up the intensity of the problems easily backfires by deepening despair.

One of the most powerful tools organizers have to mobilize action is their own work, their own stories of success. People rarely hear about stories of successful collective action, but consistently, when Topos interviewers share stories of success with research participants, their interest and engagement jump, along with their belief that change is possible. Many respondents say these stories make them want to do more; they feel compelled and encouraged to be more involved in their communities.

Topos research suggests that those who are interested in building power and momentum in the social change movement should consider the following:

- ▶ Tell stories of successful collective action because they empower and inspire, which is the most important thing we can do to motivate continued action. People rarely hear of wins, but they regularly hear about threats and loss, which can create a sense of powerlessness. Share successes widely and often, and don’t undercut them with the

notion that “it wasn’t enough.” The specific win matters less than the idea that people got something significant accomplished, which inspires audiences to keep going for more.

- ▶ Center the conversation on empowered Black and Brown people from underserved (or actively excluded) communities, telling the story of their work, their success, their vision for positive change. They are powerful and inspiring messengers within their communities and beyond.
- ▶ Establish ongoing, year-round efforts focused on building relationships and concrete change, not solely on electing candidates. This gives people an opportunity to engage in making government work better, rather than put all their faith in one elected official or political party. This work is challenging, but organizations like the Missouri Organizing and Voter Engagement Collaborative and New Virginia Majority are leading the way.
- ▶ Model civic action, and specifically call for steps “beyond voting” to help people see what is possible and how to go about enacting change themselves.

Not only are we seeing these strategies make a difference in qualitative research, in an experimental survey, we compared a control group that received no message, and three test groups where people were exposed to one of three fictional news stories. All three news stories put race at the forefront and were grounded in the experience of low-income Black and Brown communities.

The quantitative research reinforced what the ethnography recommended—the approach that demonstrates an ability to significantly boost engagement is a story of successful collective action, with local Black and Brown people speaking as community messengers. In a survey, we tested the effects of the following “news” story:

It was once a vacant lot where gangs hung out – now it’s a bustling community center, alive with after school activities, community meetings, counseling, adult education courses and much more. “This neighborhood has potential. The people here have heart and good ideas; we just need a fair shot,” says Keena Williams, one of a dozen leaders who unified this predominantly black and Hispanic community to win public funding for the Center.

Voting is important but it takes more than that to get things done,” added Lavon Booth, another neighbor working for improvements. “We support each other, like driving an older neighbor to the grocery store 5 miles away because we don’t have one in the neighborhood. This time, we used our unity for community change. We came together, wrote letters, had meetings, and went to the Capitol. We reminded leaders that every community – urban, suburban, rural, white, black, or brown – needs certain things to thrive, like great schools, safe streets, health care, and parks. For too long, elected officials ignored our community, cut funding, and everything decayed. Now, this is the start of bringing things back

Research respondents (people of color who earn less than \$50,000 annually) make strong gains in believing change is possible after reading this story. Compared with the control group, people of color exposed to this message were 18 percentage points more likely to say people working together can make a great deal of difference and were 7 percentage points more likely to support increased investments. This story has a range of beneficial effects on white respondents, including becoming more likely to believe that government should do more to solve problems (7 points), to support increased investments (8 points) and to say that “our country needs to continue making changes to give blacks equal opportunities with whites” (8 points).

As communicators experiment with these ideas, please share your work with us so we can circulate to others and model how it’s done!

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 tools to win support.



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