Making the Case for "Data for Equity": A Toolkit

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1. Using the Toolkit

W The materials here are intended to help communicators understand and use the recommendations coming out of Topos's recent round of research, which investigated how to convey that data can/should be used to further racial equity.

The material is targeted at communicators at all levels, of all backgrounds. While some of it, especially as related to "best practices," may feel familiar to experienced communicators, our experience is that brief reviews and quick reminders can be appreciated even by these users. So users of the Toolkit might include anyone from data professionals new to communicating publicly about topics related to race and equity, to seasoned communicators or funders looking for new insights (and/or refreshers) about how best to approach broad audiences on these topics.

The project both explored the traps inherent in the conversation and identified effective approaches to making the case, across a range of audiences.

None of the material in the Toolkit is intended as verbatim language that should always be repeated. Instead, it is a set of strategic ideas and considerations communicators should keep in mind, with sample language suggesting compelling ways of conveying key ideas.
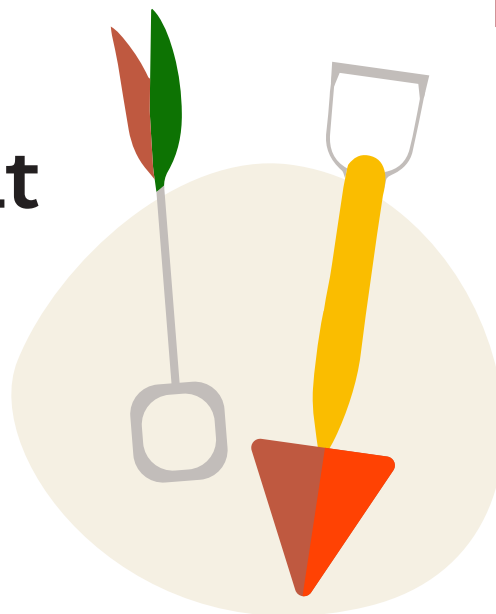
Words in quotes in the sample language offered are usually identical or very similar to language that worked well in testing.

Understanding and adapting to our audiences (without sacrificing truth)

If audiences thought just like communicators, research wouldn't be necessary—we'd know how people are going to respond. The point of the research was to learn more about why many audiences don't currently respond to messaging in the ways we'd like, and how to frame our ideas and policy agendas in ways that are more compelling to more people. This means research-based approaches are typically going to go against communicators' instincts in various ways, particularly with respect to more challenging topics.

Importantly, this doesn't mean we should avoid important topics—but it does mean we may be more effective by talking about them differently. The recommendations aren't about avoiding any topics—racism,

white privilege, etc. All relevant truths are on the table. The recommendations are about ways of getting at the important topics via the most constructive paths—i.e. without unnecessarily triggering dismissal or worse from some audiences. There are many ways to talk about the same truths— e.g. using different words—and these have different kinds of impacts on audiences.

The research included residents from a range of communities and different demographic backgrounds, and offered us a window into how messaging can reach more of the persuadable audiences we need, rather than only those who think most like ourselves.

Communicating with leaders

While the research paid some special attention to particular populations, such as people of color and moderate conservatives, the Toolkit should be useful for communications with ANY AUDIENCE when making the case for using data to further racial equity.

This includes not only community members or religious congregations, but also leaders of various kinds, in legislatures, in business, in philanthropy and so forth. Of course communicators will adapt in various ways to particular audiences and contexts, but it is also critical to use core ideas as consistently as possible, even when communicating with leaders, for a number of reasons:

New common sense
We hope to establish some new, broadly shared ideas about the topic, and want these ideas to be as widely appreciated as many conservative-leaning ideas are now (think "government shouldn't interfere in hiring decisions").

People are people
Regardless of our position, background or status, there are ways in which we all respond similarly—for instance, we all respond best to easy-to-understand, concrete ideas, we all appreciate a hopeful take on what is possible, and so forth. In Topos's experience, the same approaches that emerge from research with the public are helpful with funders, elected officials and other "insider" audiences.

Modeling the message
For audiences that include leaders, we want to model the kinds of messaging that will be helpful with their constituents and colleagues.

Echo chamber
The ideas we are up against (like dismissal of government's potential as an ally) are repeated frequently all around us. We want our core themes to be similarly pervasive, meaning they should come from lots of voices and directions.

No way to "narrowcast"
Ultimately, even if we want to target a message at a particular audience, there is no way to ensure that communication won't get out and be seen by others. We shouldn't risk putting out contradictory messages—or ones that appeal to one of our audiences, but might be strongly off-putting to others we're trying to reach.

Adapting to context

Naturally, any good communicator will do some tailoring and adapting based on goals and situation. Core themes must be consistent and compatible across all communications, but communications can vary in some other ways, such as:

Additional numbers and facts

For some audiences, such as policymakers, communicators will need additional material "in their back pocket"—such as various numbers (about costs, populations, time frames, etc.). This doesn't mean the core themes are different, however. .

Local/timely details

The recommended strategy lays out core points and themes, but these can apply to many different situations, relevant to particular times and places.

Different emphases

Different pieces of the recommended approach might be more compelling or relevant in some contexts than others. Depending on goals and audiences, one communication might put more emphasis on trusted helpers, another on close-to-home institutions, another on community partnerships, and so forth.

Adjusting various "dials"

The same core point can usually be expressed in lots of ways, for example in a more emotional or more "practical" tone. Within the recommended strategy, there are many choices available to communicators, depending on their contexts. For example, we can talk about communities that have received less public investment using language like "leaders have put less money into the neighborhood," or more like "there has been a deplorable neglect of key community institutions."

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2. Summary of Research Findings & Recommendations

This section offers brief summaries/refreshers of the key findings and recommendations from the 2023 research effort, that are the basis for the rest of the materials in the Toolkit.

The challenges

The research revealed some important challenges to using data to make the case for racial equity. These are default perspectives that easily get in the way of constructive communication about the topic, including:

• "Data" feels DEHUMANIZING—far from people's everyday concerns, doesn't capture the "real person," etc.

• SUSPICION of data is prevalent—based on profiling, government overreach, business abuses, etc.

• "COLORBLINDNESS" still resonates— many (mostly but not exclusively white) say we should just focus on health, education, etc., without worrying what race the kids are. While it is unrealistic to believe people actually ARE oblivious to race, the IDEA that we should "stop focusing on race" is appealing to many—who seem to sincerely believe it IS possible—and can lead to strong pushback when communications don't successfully navigate this dynamic.

• People have a MISTRUST of government and other institutions—making any discussion of data-driven policy potentially fraught with suspicion.

• A presumption of government INEFFECTIVENESS—so why engage hopefully?

Recommended approach

There are no silver bullets to get everyone on board with using data to promote racial equity, but the following approach proved helpful with a broad range of audiences.

Core idea: "Knowing is better than NOT knowing." This idea is hard to push back against, and also frames the topic concretely and relatably in terms of actions and choices (rather than abstract, inert "data"). It is fleshed out by other points:

Trusted helpers (nurses, teachers, social workers…) want more information in order to do a better job. Audiences readily agree that trusted helpers—which might be defined differently in different communities—want and need information about those they are helping.

Relatable institutions (schools, school boards, hospitals, etc.) can do a better job if they know what's going on.

It is helpful to point to relatable institutions (not just individuals) as actors in this common-sense story.

Community members themselves know the most, and also know what the important questions are, and can be active in gathering info (e.g. as "community scientists"). Community members aren't just passive beneficiaries, but active participants and leaders—engaged in collecting and using information, even deciding what information needs to be collected.

Community members themselves know the most, and also know what the important questions are, and can be active in gathering info (e.g. as "community scientists").

Real-life "success stories" illustrate where more/better info has led to positive outcomes. Success stories are important tools for building clarity, engagement and optimism.

>>   **For further information see: "Framing Data and Equity: Findings and Recommendations for the Data Funders Collaborative" (Topos Partnership, March 2024).**

3. Checklist for Communicators

T This is intended as a brief, simple checklist communicators can conveniently check to help them remember elements of the recommended strategy.

Not every communication will follow all this advice, but all points are worth considering every time.

When talking/writing about how and why data can be used to promote more equitable outcomes, have I remembered to...

◯ Downplay the word "data" and focus instead on common-sense ideas, e.g. that the more we know the better decisions we can make

◯ Put an emphasis on solutions and opportunities, not just problems

◯ Offer at least one easy-to-understand example (success story) where information helped a decision-maker take positive action

◯ Offer a clear sense of the kinds of people/groups who could (at least hypothetically) make use of information—including one or more trusted helpers, and ideally a local institution or decision-maker

◯ Offer a clear sense of how people/families/communities might benefit if there were more information available

◯ Mention that various groups—not just those defined by race/ethnicity—face challenges that can be addressed better with more information

◯ Help audiences see easy-to-understand obstacle(s) faced by people/kids, because of their race, that can't possibly be their fault

◯ Use numbers sparingly, if at all (ideally, "rounded" numbers), when initially making the case, since it tends to be hard for audiences to grasp the significance of numbers

◯ Use everyday language instead of professional or advocacy jargon

4. Responses to Tough Questions

The following are suggested avenues for responding to challenging questions, either about the strategy itself (from allies) or from broader audiences, as communicators use the strategy.

As with everything in the Toolkit, they are samples and illustrations that can be adapted and built from, not verbatim scripts that must be repeated.

From allies

What do I say to partners—funders, policymakers—when they tell me to avoid focusing on conversations/data about racial outcomes because it's too political or sensitive?

First, the strategies recommended here should help diffuse some of the pushback they are experiencing/anticipating. Also, there are some topics that only make sense when race is part of the story. If race is the real issue, we need to be able to point to it or we're hamstrung in getting to solutions. Finally, the longer we avoid these topics the worse the challenges get—e.g. as our opponents keep stoking racial anxiety (without being challenged on it).

What do I tell partners (advocacy allies, grantees) when they worry their staff will get threats and abuse if they use data to

lead conversations about racial inequality?

Safety is a top priority, of course, and every individual/organization must make their own decisions about it. But the strategies recommended here are partly about reducing the potential for hostile resistance (e.g. by mentioning other factors, not just race)—and giving us greater confidence, so that we're less likely to silence ourselves by assuming we'll get a negative reaction.

It sounds like you're advising we don't address important issues head-on? E.g. "racism," "white supremacy," "equity," etc.

The recommendations aren't about avoiding any topics. Everything is on the table. The recommendations are about ways of getting at the important topics via the most constructive paths—i.e. without unnecessarily triggering dismissal or worse from some audiences. There are many ways to talk about the same truths—e.g. using different words—and these have different kinds of impacts on audiences.

Why should we spend so much energy being careful about white sensitivity/ fragility?

The recommendations are about achieving positive outcomes without avoiding important truths. If, to achieve equity,

we need broad audiences to get on board, we need to think about how we're addressing them—just as we would with any audience on any topic.

From audiences—public, public sector, media, etc.

Why should I advocate for/want the government to use data for other people when my own needs aren't being met?

We all need public leaders and institutions to respond to various needs and to promote people's well-being. We all need good roads, good safety, health services, etc. If we don't know what the needs are and where, there's no chance we can address them well. If the facts and numbers show that your community needs something, we should pressure public leaders to act on it. Same for other communities, who may face entirely different challenges. A teacher, a nurse, a city councilperson in any community should have the information that lets them do their job better.

Won't linking data across agencies just make it easier for bad actors to access my data because it'll all be in one place?

Teachers, nurses, social workers [and/or other "trusted helpers" in the community] say they can do their jobs better if they know more about how people and families are doing, and that having that information spread out in different places makes it harder to get a clear picture. Of course, for this information to be collected and used in the right ways, by the right people, community members MUST have a say in how all that happens. They should even be involved in making it happen—collecting information they think is important, telling others what the key questions are in their neighborhoods that need looking into, and so forth.

Will these equity strategies mean white people get less?

When a neighborhood that didn't have one gets a pre-K center, or a group of people with a particular health issue get care, or a toxic facility that has been making people sick in a certain community gets shut down, those aren't about taking anything away from others—and these are all the kinds of improvements that can happen if decision-makers have the right information. But the fact is that many of the decision-makers have been wealthy white men who, intentionally or not, have tended to put more attention and money into some neighborhoods than others—for example, more likely to approve a park in a white neighborhood and more likely to approve a noisy facility in a neighborhood where people of color live.

What about profiling? Won't data be used against people like me?

This kind of thing has definitely happened, and it's why more and more communities are getting involved; not to shut down the collection of information, but to make sure it is done right—with their own involvement and leadership, to make sure

the right questions are asked, and the right information is used in the right ways.

Sample brief language

The following are short, to-the-point illustrations of how the recommended approaches could play out in social media posts, etc., when brevity is needed.

• Is it better to know how kids from different backgrounds are doing in our community, or to not know?

• How are our kids doing? Let's get the numbers/facts to find out.

• When community members get involved in gathering information about how kids, families and schools are doing, we can make better decisions for our future.

• Different groups in our community face different challenges—related to their age, their income level, their health status, their race, etc. We need to know what these are so we can find the solutions.

• Teachers/nurses/social workers/ etc. in our community say the more information they have, the more helpful they can be.

• How did Philly figure out where to add pre-K slots? They put together numbers from different agencies and figured out which neighborhoods had the fewest openings and the most kids who needed them.

• City officials don't know the needs until someone shows them the numbers.

• In LA, health advocates were shown numbers showing that many residents, particularly in Black and Latino communities, had limited mental health services available to them. Advocates were then able to convince city officials to address that need.

• You know the most about your community, so help make sure the right questions get asked, and that information gets used in ways that are beneficial.

• Information is much less useful when it is spread out in multiple different places.

• Public money should be used to address people's needs and priorities—but that can't happen if decision-makers don't have the right information.

5. Contexts

T The issues at the heart of this project can come up in a variety of contexts. The following are brief illustrations of how the recommended approaches might begin to play out in different real-world communications situations.

Defending the collection and publication of data such as the Youth Risk Behavior Survey—threatened by accusations of government overreach, and insistence on colorblindness

If we don't know how our kids are doing, we can't do anything to help them and to solve problems when they arise. If girls are tending to pick up smoking, if boys are getting pulled into gangs, if Latinx kids are experiencing stresses that make it hard to focus in school … we need the numbers that help us notice these things (or: we expect our schools to notice these patterns), so we can do something to help.

Enlisting community members to engage in identifying the questions they want data systems to answer

If we want to do right by the families in our community, we need to know how they're doing—what struggles they're facing, where things are going well vs. not going well, etc. In many cases it's the people in the community who already have the bestsense of how people are doing.

But there may also be topics where you don't yet have the information needed. What do you wish you knew about how your community is doing? Is it about how many kids might be going hungry? Is it about whether kids from some backgrounds are struggling in school more than others, and what the causes might be? There are lots of ways to gather information and numbers to answer questions like these, and the way to create the greatest benefit is for community members themselves to get involved in how this data collection happens.

Testifying before a state policy board about the importance of collecting and using racial demographic data

Some are asking that we ignore certain facts and patterns, and that you make decisions on behalf of our state without reference to those facts and patterns. In effect, they're saying it's better NOT TO KNOW. Does this really make any sense to anyone? Is this how responsible decision-making works? Is it how you'd consider how senior citizens are doing? Or whether programs for children are working, or any other questions where decisions are needed? By insisting on NOT KNOWING, not having the information?

Urging philanthropic leadership to invest in narrative change and "lean in"

(instead of retreating from equity-related conversations), providing grantees with strategies for negotiating these strategies

Groups with particular agendas are currently pressuring funders to walk away from conversations about equity because these might be controversial. But if we know that there are some real, concrete obstacles preventing some communities or families from reaching their potential—obstacles they didn't create, but that affect their life chances—is it better to stay quiet about those truths, or to find ways of clarifying them, and engaging more people in addressing the issues hopefully and effectively? This is what narrative work means on this issue—making the case that it's better to know than to not know, and connecting the dots for people about dynamics that have a racial dimension, just as we would for any other topic.

Making the case to a school board that integration of data (including program evaluation and community indicator data) can help Improve rates of high school graduation, reduce youth involvement with the criminal system, and reduce youth suicide

The people whose jobs involve helping kids—from teachers to counselors to nurses, and others—say that when we put the information we have together, instead of storing it separately in different places, they get more effective at their jobs. There's so much we know about the factors that help kids achieve stability and success, or that get in their way. But there's also so much we're still learning—about

how broader patterns work, and also how to understand what's going on with individual kids, so that we can help make sure they graduate from high school and avoid troubles with law enforcement or self-harm. Putting information together, that's currently gathered in different places through different systems, makes it easier to get the full picture of what's going on with a particular kid, family or community, so the helpers can offer better help.

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