Framing Data and Equity

When advocating for the collection and use of data to help promote racial equity, communicators face a host of complicated framing challenges—and frequently encounter significant real-world pushback that slows down or derails their efforts. Knowing that the narrative context is critical, the Data Funders Collaborative (DFC) asked Topos Partnership to explore the current dynamics at the intersection of data, government, and racial equity.

The Topos research approach focuses on understanding the "cultural common sense"—the deeply held understandings that are pervasive, unquestioned, and have the power to shape people's views and behavior. This is the level at which we win and lose.

How do we effectively reach audiences that may be indifferent or even hostile to our efforts, and increase the odds that beneficial research efforts aren't ignored or shut down? The research[1] both explored the traps inherent in the conversation and helped identify effective approaches to making the case for effective, community-driven data-related efforts toward the goal of increasing racial equity.[2]

Key Framing Challenges

The research clarified a set of obstacles to a constructive conversation about using data to promote equity:

Data is abstract, distant.
Across all geographies and demographics, the topic of data typically feels far removed from people's lives and concerns, making it difficult to achieve a positive and engaged conversation when it is the focus.

Data feels dehumanizing.
When people do focus on the idea of data and how it can be used to depict individuals and communities, they often feel that "numbers" simply can't capture the truth, and that data ignores the real, human essence. We see this view across all geographies and demographics.

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[1] The findings emerge from research conducted between June to September 2023 and included: 63 ethnographic interviews across Michigan, New Mexico, Pennsylvania and Georgia; small group (3-4 participant) online table sessions with 42 people from around the country. 60% of all research participants (ethnography and table sessions) were BIPOC. Stakeholders working at the intersection of data and equity informed the project at the outset of the research and contributed toward the final refinement of recommendations. See the accompanying report for a full methodology and demographic breakdown. Also see the accompanying Toolkit for further guidance and sample language.

[2] Note that the assumption throughout this summary report is that recommendations will be used to promote data efforts that communicators believe are being "done right." A number of objections raised by audiences are valid and recognized by practitioners themselves—e.g. a lack of community involvement in data efforts, or the misuse of data for "profiling." Thus, these recommendations have to do with more effectively promoting "good" efforts—NOT making the case that data is always used beneficially.

Data can be used against us.

Across all geographies and demographics, people suspect that data will be used in ways that hurt rather than benefit them. This can be about profiling people of color or a general sense that data collectors have a self-interested agenda.

We should be "colorblind" (race-related data is irrelevant).

"Race-dismissive" audiences (those who do not recognize the importance of race in shaping people's opportunities, experiences and outcomes), perceive a focus on race as disingenuous, divisive, and to be avoided. (Note that while this huge category of Americans tends to be largely white, it also includes people of color who, in some situations, insist that race shouldn't be a focus.)

Skepticism about government means skepticism about data efforts.

Widespread, negative, default perceptions of the government's intentions and its competence lead to skepticism about its collection and use of data. Many assume data efforts are controlled by people who have power, but who don't care about regular people or are incapable of doing anything helpful.

" *Like I'm Black Trinidad and Puerto Rican, Native American… you definitely get targeted… targeting us more in a stereotypical and negative way…it's so much data that's collected but I don't feel like… the system—no matter what type of system—is really not set up for minorities.*

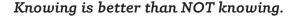*Woman, 35, Black and Indigenous, Waynesboro, VA.*

" *You can put down whatever race you want because there's so many different races and genders and, and you don't know who is who anymore cause they don't look the same… You don't have to have a label. You can change it. You have the right to do that. So does it really matter?*

Woman, 61, white, conservative, Picayune, MS.

Recommended Approach: Knowing is better than NOT knowing.

The research uncovered a promising approach that fosters a common-sense understanding of why it makes sense to use data, including to promote equity:

Knowing is better than NOT knowing.

The simple idea that taking helpful action and making decisions requires knowing what's going on frames the topic concretely and relatably. Importantly, it is also very difficult to push back against. In short, it's an approach that can put the issue on our terrain.

Sample Language[3]

Every area or community faces some issues or problems. To address these and create positive change, we need good information about how people and communities are doing. It's better to KNOW what our problems are and who is facing them than to NOT KNOW.

This central concept is fleshed out by a number of related points that can be deployed depending on the particular situation:

Trusted helpers need more information in order to do a better job.

Confirming prior Topos research, people respond positively to the narrative that trusted helpers (e.g. nurses, social workers, teachers, etc., depending on the community) want and need information about the people and communities they are helping in order to do their jobs well.

Sample Language

Teachers, social workers, and others who provide services to people and families say they can do a much better job if they have good information about the people and communities they serve.

Relatable (local) people and institutions benefit when information is available.

The story is more concrete, clear, and relatable when we highlight the people who will benefit (for example, children, parents, people in the community, etc.) and the familiar institutions (for example, the school board, "our town," etc.) that use and benefit from the information.

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[3] Note that the sample language throughout this report is illustrative and not intended to be used verbatim; however, the language offered is identical or very similar to language that worked well in testing.

Sample Language

For one project, middle school students worked with a college professor and interviewed their peers to understand their school's social climate—things like student-teacher interactions, bullying, and specific challenges faced by Black students. The student researchers then worked with the professor to make recommendations to the school leadership about improving the school climate for all students.

Community members participate in gathering the information.

Emphasize ways in which community members themselves are engaged in sharing, collecting and using information, including deciding what information needs to be collected. One phrase that proved sticky and helpful in testing was "community scientists" who help gather information about the institutions and communities that they already know so well.

Sample Language

In some places, "community scientists"— community members who help collect and use information about their area—even lead the research. After all, they often know the most about how their community works, what it needs, and who to talk to.

Different groups face different challenges (and solutions).

Especially for race-dismissive audiences, consider situating the idea of race-specific data within the broader (and less "controversial") idea that all kinds of groups of people face challenges and

> " *...it's probably better if people are involved that are familiar with the community, familiar with how to address the community, be aware of... the issues that impact the community, of course [that] probably makes a big difference.*
>
> *Woman, 47, Hispanic/Latine, conservative Democrat, New York, NY.*

require solutions that others may not be able to relate to. This context helps inoculate against concerns that race is the "only" consideration and helps these audiences relate more easily to the idea of a focus on the needs of different populations. Importantly, this isn't a way of avoiding explicit discussion of race, but rather a way of approaching it that helps diffuse pushback among some audiences.

Sample Language

We want everyone to have an equal chance to succeed in school—no matter what their background—but various groups of kids may face particular challenges we need to understand. Kids in rural households may ... while kids with a health condition like ... And Black and brown kids often ... By understanding and addressing each of these challenges, we give all kids and schools the best opportunity to thrive.

Showing that it really works: Success stories are vital.

"Success stories" can be important tools for building engagement and optimism. Easy-to-understand real-world, or even hypothetical examples of how good information leads to positive outcomes help clarify what the story of data is all about, and promote hope and optimism.

Sample Language

In Jacksonville, Florida, researchers had access to school information that showed that child abuse reports spiked after the release of report cards, but only when report cards were sent out on Fridays. This led to changing the day of the week that report cards were sent out to prevent that abuse before it happened—and also training for doctors and teachers to talk to parents about how to support their children to do well in school.

The following checklist can help communicators think through how they are applying the strategy. Note that not every communication needs to check every box, 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...?

• <u>Downplay the word "data"</u> and focus instead on the common-sense idea that the more we know the better decisions we can make

• Put an <u>emphasis on solutions and opportunities</u>, not just problems

• Offer at least one easy-to-understand example (<u>success story</u>) where information helped a decision-maker take positive action

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

• Offer a clear sense of how people/families/communities would <u>benefit</u> if there were more information available

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

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