

DEFINING

WE

IN ENVIRONMENTAL ADVOCACY



by Dick Brooks & Michael Goldberg  
ActionMedia

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*Cover: the Earth from lunar orbit  
from Apollo8, Dec 24, 1968.*

## Introduction

It was a great blue heron that got this essay started. I was on the phone with the communications director of a national environmental organization. We were working together, she in an air-conditioned office in Washington, I on a screen porch in northern Minnesota, to develop an upcoming news release. Just as she was saying, “the environmental community thinks that...” the bird flew into view forty feet away and folded itself onto a rock beside the creek, completely taking me away from her point. Of course, the heron wasn’t part of what she meant by “the environmental community.” I wondered if I was.

A few months later the phrase “environmental community” came up again when a client sent ActionMedia a draft news release announcing an important negotiated settlement. “Today,” said the release, “the environmental community reached an agreement with Northern States Power Company....”

ActionMedia advised changing the lead to read, “Today, Northern States Power made a commitment to [do something significant about a long-standing environmental concern].” Our rewrite dropped the phrase “environmental community,” because we didn’t know who that meant. We did know the agreement had been negotiated to completion by a handful of people employed by a few non-profit environmental organizations.

As ActionMedia, Dick Brooks and I provide strategic services to advocates, helping them strengthen and improve their communications. With support from The McKnight Foundation, we began looking closely at how activists—especially those working profes-

sionally from environmental organizations—talk about what they do. How much attention do advocates pay to their specialized language and assumptions? What could they do to make their efforts more effective? By reviewing media coverage of several hundred environmental stories, talking with a wide range of advocacy professionals and volunteers, and conducting a series of group meetings, we explored the question, “Who speaks for the environment?”

**What we learned is this: people speaking out for social change had better be pretty sure who they mean, when they say we.**

These are highly polarized times. The struggle to define *us* and *them* is played out daily across a wide spectrum of issues. Exclusive language and concepts unnecessarily contribute to the polarization. In many cases, surveys and focus groups show that a majority of Americans actually share many of the values and essential goals of progressive change. But do these same Americans see themselves as part of the *we* that issue advocates are talking about? Or, are these potential allies being left out of the very messages designed to mobilize their interest and support?

Advocates can become more powerful by carefully choosing their rhetoric to broaden their definitions of *we*. Too often, the word is used to mean everyone who agrees with us. When advocates define *we* as everyone who will benefit from this change, far more people can see themselves in the story, and understand that their own interests are being addressed.

The crucial challenge is to look closely, critically and creatively, at what is actually being said and implied in organizational and individual communications. When underlying assumptions are brought to the surface and examined, intentional choices can be made about what to keep and what to lose. As a result, specific messages will be more successful in reaching individual listeners. In the process, the cumulative improved communications of advocates will work to shift the terms of debate that drive the public discussion.

It is our hope that this little book contributes to the ongoing effort of people speaking out for positive change, in environmental policy and in society at large, to say what they mean to say.

**Michael Goldberg, July 2004**

## *Environmental groups clearly defined their role as backing up local citizens.*

### **Citizens in Action**

“This is the Iron Range,” a northern Minnesota businessman said with chagrin. “We love smokestacks here, always have.” He was reacting to the news, in summer 2001, that two multinational corporations, UPM-Kymmene and ALLETE, were teaming up to build a 225 Megawatt coal-fired power plant on the banks of the Upper Mississippi, in Grand Rapids, Minnesota. They set up a local office for the new venture named Rapids Power Company, and announced they would be filing permit applications in late 2001. They also promised to hold a series of public informational meetings, beginning in fall 2001.

State approval of the project was widely viewed as a sure thing. UPM-Kymmene’s Blandin Paper Company was the town’s cornerstone (and founding) employer. The paper mill said it needed an assured source of low-priced process steam and electricity to remain competitive—and to consider *future* mill expansions. ALLETE’s subsidiary, Minnesota Power Company, already operated a 1020 MW coal plant seven miles up river. Both companies are major employers and vital to the region’s economy.

The Minnesota Public Service Commission had calculated, in the wake of the rolling California power blackouts, that Minnesota was facing an imminent need for more electrical generation capacity. The California debacle was being blamed, by politicians, reporters, and corporate leaders, on costly and elaborate environmental regulations. Even on the scenic Mississippi, in the heart of “The 1,000 Lakes County” which was heavily invested and dependent on

tourism and recreation, the political environment was ripe for pushing through a new coal burner. This charged atmosphere caused the director of a major statewide environmental organization to say off the record, “This proposal for Grand Rapids is a flat-out bad idea, for a lot of reasons. Common sense alone says it shouldn’t be built. But, nobody should be able to say it was ‘the environmentalists’ that stopped it.”

A few citizens, some of whom would see the proposed power plant from their living room windows, got together to stop the project. They formed an opposition group, Citizens Against Rapids Power Site (CARPS). But as more citizens became involved, a broader perspective emerged. “We can’t just be opposed, we have to be *for* something,” they said. Furthermore, almost everyone agreed, “If people see this as environment versus jobs, we’re sunk. If we’re seen as being against the mill, we’ll be seen as against our own town.” And, “The last thing we want is for some big-name environmental group to come up here opposing the proposal.”

By December, the small group agreed to change its name to Citizens Advocating Responsible Power Production (CARPP). They hammered out a Mission Statement explicitly calling for an *alternative* to the proposed coal plant that would “meet the needs of Blandin Paper Company for low-cost, reliable power, as well as the community’s need for an environmentally clean, aesthetically pleasing and healthy place to live and visit.”

Although the citizens knew they did not want any outside environmental groups taking a public leadership role, they made contact with several such groups. Some of the groups provided background legal, financial, scientific and strategic advice and support. The Izaak Walton League, which had a local Grand Rapids chapter, sent staff to town several times to talk about mercury deposition and airborne particulates created by coal burning power plants. These environmental groups clearly defined their role as backing up local citizens, and they respected local leadership in strategy and tactics.

CARPP’s strategy was to make their own doubts and questions as public as possible. They avoided accusations and stuck to legitimate questions:

Exactly how much additional capacity would the paper mill need? Would the paper mill commit to an expansion? What were the options available to meet the need, other than building a base-load 225 MW facility? Why not co-generation to burn wood waste? Where would the ash be landfilled? How much mercury would end up in the air and water? What would moving and crushing coal in the middle of town mean for traffic, noise, air quality?

“Our questions drove the company nuts,” recalls a CARPP member. “We were citing information from their own documents, and they didn’t like it one bit.” Neither did the local newspaper, or most of the town’s business and political leaders. “The people asking questions were getting a lot of pressure, and that’s hard in a small town.”

Within weeks, the community was at odds. “People were either opposed to the plant, or mad at those of us who were,” said a CARPP leader. “A lot of the folks opposed weren’t willing to speak up, because it’s a small town. But some people kept the heat on, asking questions.”

A local wildlife manager spoke out about mercury accumulating in fish. Area doctors issued a statement expressing their concern about the respiratory health impacts of particulate emissions. CARPP presented its information in its own public meetings, and to the local Chamber of Commerce.

In every presentation and statement, they stuck to their mission, defining the issues in terms of meeting the community’s economic and environmental needs. They kept asking a simple, unanswered question: how else can the paper mill get the power it needs?

CARPP looked at the differing individual interests of the paper mill and the electric company, and asked questions that highlighted the differences. They organized voter pressure on the City Council, because they knew the plant would be built on city-owned riverfront.

In February 2002, already behind schedule, Rapids Power announced that their permit applications would be further delayed until May. The company’s public information meetings were drawing overflow crowds of informed citizens asking questions, and

challenging company documents and statements. In response, Rapids Power abruptly announced it would not hold any more public information meetings.

In April 2002, Rapids Power sought a six-month extension on the permit process, with papers to be filed no later than November 1, 2002. The project was almost a year behind the schedule announced in 2001. Under growing public scrutiny, the City Council initiated a lengthy formal process for community discussion, through a new, impartial Citizen Task Force. The Task Force developed an ambitious work plan, and began asking its own questions. But before the Task Force was even fully underway, local newspapers reported that, due to changes in market conditions, the Rapids Power partnership was being dissolved. The coal plant proposal was dead.

**“The Rapids Power technology remains the right choice for electric and steam requirements, but its cost is presently too high to support marketable electricity and lower mill steam,”** said Eric Norberg, vice president of strategic initiatives for Minnesota Power...

**—Duluth News Tribune**

“Maybe that’s really why they dropped it, we’ll never know,” said one of the citizen activists. “They might make a new proposal for a power plant, and that might be a good thing—the paper mill operates an outdated 37 MW plant, and a new one could give them power and be more efficient besides. But whatever they build, it won’t be anywhere near the scale of the original proposal. And, there’s no way it will happen without some real community discussion.”

# *The communication is effective because the listener shares assumptions and values with the speaker.*

## Who is We?

People who want to change something usually begin by finding other people who share their concerns. This group of like-minded people, whether a few neighbors or a coalition of established organizations, becomes *we* who want this change. The basic communications challenge is thought of as:

- Increasing our number (getting more of us), and
- Moving some target to take some action (persuading them).

From the beginning, certain assumptions are at work. First among these is, *we* are right. But with this necessary conviction come other, unexamined assumptions about who *we* is.

When advocates fail to ask, “Who do we mean by *we*?” a lot of people are bound to be excluded from whatever story they tell: people who are different from them, people they haven’t thought of, people they don’t know. When communications start from the assumption that *we* means *those who agree*, the messages will tend to exclude whoever doesn’t already hold the same position.

For example, a transit advocate might say:

**We need policy that gives us options for walking or riding bikes for short trips, instead of automatically getting in the car.**

The speaker intends *we* to mean everyone. But, there are hidden assumptions. What about the listener who doesn’t have the option

of walking or biking? Perhaps they have a physical impairment. Maybe their neighborhood’s physical limitations make it impossible. A listener in that situation is excluded from *we who want options*. The message also fails to include everyone who has no car to get into. However, there is a much larger group of people who are left out of the story: all those people who may be physically able to, but who wouldn’t dream in a million years of riding a bike to the store for a gallon of milk.

“We need policy that gives us options for walking or riding bikes” is an unexamined or loose use of *we*.

Every advocacy communication, *We want this, or that*, works from some assumption of *we*. When the communication is effective, it’s because the listener shares important assumptions and values with the speaker. *Assuming* that a listener will see themselves as part of the same *we* creates problems. When the definition of *we* is not clearly thought through, the default assumption is likely to be *we in this room*, or *we who crafted this message*, or *we who agree*.

Another example of an exclusive use of *we* comes from bicycle advocates:

**We need streets that accommodate bicycles and pedestrians, as well as cars and buses.**

In this case *we* means everyone that wants streets to accommodate bicycles and pedestrians. *You* drivers should accommodate *us* cyclists and walkers.

Notice what happens when the same interest is rephrased in terms of *we who will benefit*:

**We need complete streets—streets that can be safely used by everyone, including kids and pedestrians, bicycles, buses and cars.**

In this case, *we* includes everyone, except those who don’t use the streets. Now, instead of advocating policy to *accommodate* bicyclists and pedestrians, the concern becomes how to build streets that meet the needs of all the users.

Asking “who will benefit?” is a good exercise for thinking about who is included, and who is left out. The citizen group that opposed the Rapids Power plant worked hard at defining *we* to mean everyone in town. They disciplined themselves to think and talk about the issue in terms of the supposed benefit of building the plant—the prospects for keeping and possibly expanding mill jobs. That meant challenging the proposal from the broadest perspective: is a big coal plant the best way to ensure the continued vitality of the paper mill and the community as a great place to live, work and visit?



*Christianity Today* ad 2003  
Credit: www.whatwouldjesusdrive.org

There are times, though, when advocates may consciously choose to speak from a perspective that excludes most people. A noteworthy example is *What Would Jesus Drive?*, the Evangelical Environmental Network’s campaign aimed at air pollution caused by SUVs. The campaign included national print ads, television ads in four states, and a complete sweep of national media before and during the TV run. It should be noted, however, that the resulting news coverage was not about SUVs or air pollution: it was all about the campaign, and reactions to it.

November 21, 2002—Reverend Jim Ball, the executive director of the Evangelical Environmental Network, said the link between the teachings of Jesus and the fuel economy of cars was clear to him... “The most basic teaching of Jesus is to love your neighbor like yourself. How can you do that when you are filling your neighbor’s lungs with pollution?”

—Good Morning America

November 25, 2002—The greens and their religious supporters... don't see virtue in prosperity. Instead, they take it as a matter of faith that no one should have the kind of power a V-8 offers, that Americans just shouldn't be able to turn onto the highway, accelerate to a good cruising speed and enjoy it. It's all somehow immoral.

—Wall Street Journal

The campaign provoked plenty of friendly jokes (The Apostles would have carpooled in a Honda, being of one Accord), as well as sarcasm and ridicule. The response of the President of Ford Motor Company to the EEN demand for specific action was reported by EEN as, “We’ll get back to you.”

In this campaign, *we* are moral Christians, calling for individual acts of conscience to change individual immoral behavior. The assumptions, presumably fully intentional ones, have clear implications for organizing strategy, aimed at immoral SUV drivers rather than, say, voters who might be convinced to demand more efficient, cleaner SUVs.

Secular environmental advocates, with a range of strategies aimed at auto pollution, also have their evangelical streak, and are inclined to define *we* as those opposed to SUVs. Yet, SUV advertising usually features the outdoors and natural places. The manufacturers realize these generate positive feelings among SUV buyers. SUV drivers include millions of people who love the outdoors, and millions who might also be concerned about air pollution and gas consumption. One critic of the WWJD? campaign put it this way:

**Environmentalists need to qualify their statements when attacking SUVs, SUV owners and when they address vehicle pollution in general, because there are reasons why SUVs are good vehicles to use.**

- SUVs can haul a number of people, which is the ultimate form of pollution reduction—group transportation.
- SUVs can be used to carry materials for personal business or possibly home improvement.
- SUVs can move boats, campers and other trailer items for either business or entertainment purposes.

Unless environmentalists are against group transportation, small businesses, improving our neighborhoods or outdoor recreation, they should form constructive arguments that do not fall victim to broad brushstroke generalism.

—www.Liberator.net

While Liberator’s point is satirical, it nonetheless demonstrates how assumptions behind *we* determine how an individual will ultimately receive the message.

Unexamined assumptions make great ammunition for opponents. In Grand Rapids, it looked like it would be easy for Rapids Power to control the terms of discussion about their proposal:

**We need electricity for jobs, so anyone who opposes the plant is opposing jobs.**

The ability of the citizen group to change the terms—from “environment versus jobs,” to “what’s the best solution”—came from identifying and publicly turning these assumptions back onto the opponents. They asked, exactly what are the energy needs for what jobs, and how can the community best meet its needs? Rapids Power and its supporters were stopped in their tracks.

*The terms were redefined as “those environmentalist extremists” versus “the rest of us.”*

## The Opposition

Advocates for progressive environmental and social change are fighting against years of highly effective and disciplined communications designed and fielded to undermine them. The conservative shift in America’s political discourse over the past two generations has been driven by well-conceived strategies to define *us* and *them*. There are deliberate efforts to create and exploit divisions between people, and to marginalize the advocates on a wide range of issues by defining them as selfish, elite, or as special interests. Advocates for justice are portrayed as advocates for “just us”: “*They* are the problem,” the opposition says, “*we* are everyone else.”

This is blatant in the organized opposition to the environmental movement. As late as 1971, the American Heritage Dictionary contained no entry for *environmentalist* or *environmentalism*, and the terms were only rarely used in the press. When Rachel Carson’s bestseller *Silent Spring* was published in 1962, air pollution was turning the skies over many cities brown and acrid. Water pollution was visible and widespread. Lake Erie was “dead.” A few years later, the oily, bubbling and oozing Cuyahoga River caught fire.

But, on Christmas Eve, 1968, the world got a new picture—Earth from space, transmitted home from lunar orbit, by the crew of Apollo 8. A new story was told in that picture. It defined *us* as all of us who live, breathe, eat and drink—humans together on a finite planet Earth.



**A modern icon**

Credit: NASA Apollo 17

Years of work by people speaking out for change led to the popular Earth Day mass demonstration in 1970. Millions of Americans participated. Legislatures from 42 states passed resolutions to commemorate the date. So many U.S. Senators and Congressmen went home to participate in local events that Congress closed its doors that day. They returned to pass, with President Nixon's support, the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, and revisions to the 1969 National Environmental Policy Act.

Interests opposed to this growing effort to regulate and control pollution went to work immediately. By the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan, the terms were redefined again, from the unified idea of we who live and breathe to a fractured construct of *those environmentalist extremists* and *the rest of us*.

They've been at it ever since.

People think that environmentalism just means being for clean air and clean water—and who could possibly be against these things? But the actual message of Earth Day is much deeper, and much different. In fact, we believe that the environmentalists don't really care about clean air and clean water. Their real goal is to destroy technology and to subordinate mankind to nature."

—Robert Tracinski, Earth Day 2000 Countermarch.

Shout down the tree huggers! It's time to speak up! Really, would you rather drill in Alaska or buy oil from the Arabs? Asked that question, environmentalists always retreat into conservation or some such that we all agree with. They will not address the question.

—SeniorNet web log posting, April 2004

"Utter contempt for those who are truly being hurt..." is how Robert J. Smith, the Competitive Enterprise Institute's Senior Environmental Scholar, describes the attitude of liberal Senators, Greenpeace, and other outspoken environmental groups that offer ineffective solutions for restoring the health of our forests. "These groups are more concerned about promoting their own agendas than supporting more practical solutions offered in President Bush's Healthy Forest Restoration Act," [Smith] says.

—Competitive Enterprise Institute, Sept 5, 2003

These radical environmentalists want to obstruct businesses from legally operating in this state. Their real agenda is to run businesses out of the state, kill jobs and force our families to check out of modern life.

—Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce

At the top levels of political strategy, pollster and strategist Frank Luntz provided the Republican National Committee with a thick communications-briefing book for the 2002 Congressional elections. The brief included a 13-page memo on communications about the environment. According to Luntz's analysis, the environmental messages of Democrats should be "characterized as the 'Protection Racket,' of politics"

"The mainstream, centrist American now sees the excesses of so-called 'environmentalists' and prefers the label 'conservationist' instead."

Luntz recommends that Republicans “avoid terms like ‘providing stewardship’ (passive and unclear) in favor of ‘preserving and protecting’ (active and clear).”

Republicans need to “convince [voters] of your sincerity and concern...Any discussion of the environment has to be grounded in an effort to reassure a skeptical public that you care about the environment for its own sake... The three words Americans are looking for in an environmental policy are ‘safer,’ ‘cleaner,’ ‘healthier.’”

The Luntz memo best illustrates the degree to which the label “environmentalist” carries negative connotation with this quote from a focus group participant:

**“I’m usually the one running around the house shutting off lights, making sure the water is turned off. Still, when I think environmentalist—I’m sorry if someone is offended by this—I think of somebody chaining themselves to a tree.”**

The environment has been framed.

*When stories contain unexamined assumptions, the assumptions become part of the common sense people hold.*

## The Environmental Community

Environmental issues are in the news everyday. Unfortunately, the coverage can do more harm than good. Whatever the details, the news media predominately portray environmentalism as a narrow “special interest” pitted against business, landowners, government, etc. For example, on October 16, 2003, National Public Radio’s “All Things Considered” broadcast a story by reporter Elizabeth Arnold, about a proposal for a major natural gas pipeline in Alaska.

**ARNOLD:** ...But what may be even more compelling about this project is, there’s little in the way of opposition, even from the environmental community, which has finally found a development project it can back.

[Spokesperson] is a spokesperson for the Sierra Club:

**SPOKESPERSON:** I think most environmental groups recognize that you won’t wean yourself off the filthiest fuel we have—coal—unless we use more natural gas to run our power plants, and there's lots of it in Alaska ...

What did NPR listeners learn from this story? The “environmental community” is usually, perhaps automatically, opposed to any development proposal, if not in this particular case.

The *New York Times* editorial board also uses the phrase “environmental community.”

**The Bush administration and the environmental community are at odds again, this time over... (August 21, 2002)**

There are those in the environmental community who fear [President Bush] is plotting to weaken the Clean Air Act in fundamental ways... (Oct. 22, 2002)

It is too soon for the environmental community or its Senate champions, like Joseph Lieberman, John McCain and James Jeffords, to rest on their laurels. (March 24, 2003)

What do readers of the *New York Times* learn? That this “environmental community” consists of political insiders—specialists whose job it is to protect the environment, pursuing their own interests in opposition to other interests.

The story of environmentalists versus someone else is told day after day. It’s a story everyone recognizes, expects, and accepts. It’s not that these journalists are trying to put down environmental advocates. Nor are they trying to support one side or another, or inflame divisive politics. The reporters and writers are working from commonly held assumptions about news and about how news stories are constructed.

Conflict is always easy to use, and is popular with audiences. And if it’s a story about the environment, it’s easy to tell the story as a conflict between environmentalists and somebody else.

Only the rarest story is so powerful that it changes everything. The news media’s cumulative storytelling, and re-telling, is what shapes and defines how issues are understood. The news media’s power lies in its ability to define and convey the *relationships* and *meaning* of events. The media puts forward stories that many, many people come to understand in common. When these stories contain unexamined assumptions, as they always do, the assumptions become a part of the *common sense* picture of the world that people hold.

Changing how people (including reporters and editors) understand problems and possible solutions requires looking at the assumptions in play. What assumptions are in the reporting? In the opposition’s positions? In the advocates’ own speech? Taking action to influence or expose these assumptions can change the terms of discussion. Changing these fundamental definitions is the real communications goal for people speaking out for change. That is where the power lies.



**Some communities are designed to exclude others**

Credit: FAAC International.

It’s common to describe a group with a shared interest as a community. The on-line community. The Mars research community. The advocacy community.

These abstractions are not merely shorthand or convenient placeholders. They also have tremendous influence on how things are said, what is heard, and how *us* and *them* is likely to be understood. Reporters easily refer to “the environmental community” because that’s what they are given by environmentalists, as in this release from the Natural Resources Defense Council:

**Environmental Community Urges Senate to Oppose the “New” Energy Bill... An analysis shows that Sen. Domenici’s “slimmed-down” bill is still disastrous for America...**

Or, from the Colorado Environmental Coalition website:

**This bill would create a south metro water authority—a concept the environmental community strongly supports. The bill is still being drafted...**

Or, the League of Conservation Voters:

**Dear Senator:**

**The League of Conservation Voters (LCV) is the political voice of the national environmental community.**

Or, in New York:

With thousands of individual supporters and over 130 organizational members, Environmental Advocates is truly the voice of New York's environmental community.

In statements to the press, fundraising letters, websites, email alerts and in conversations, with each other and with decision makers, environmentalists often define *we* as *we in the environmental community*. And it is used to mean many different things.

Sometimes it means everyone who agrees with us.

Sometimes it means a specific group of organizations working together on a specific issue.

Sometimes it means the industry of non-profit environmental organizations working on lots of different issues.

Too often it is used as a screen for unnamed people and organizations.

The phrase has no defined meaning, making it, at best, a weak rhetorical device.

Yet the real problem isn't the lack of definition. It's that this loose use of environmental community, or *we*, reveals insufficient attention to the underlying question: for whom are we speaking? When people hear of a community, they identify themselves in relation to it—either they recognize themselves as a member of that community, or, as outside of the community. And that's directly related to whether they can be mobilized.

*“We are faced with a choice: will we remain a middle-class group of backpackers?”*

## Who's Left Out?

When advocates fail to ask, “Who do we mean by *we*?” they invariably exclude a lot of potential supporters—especially people they don't know, or don't talk to. This reinforces existing social arrangements and social divisions between groups, including divisions by race and class. One way of addressing racial divides is to be explicit about *we*.

In May 1992, on the hundredth anniversary of the Sierra Club, Executive Director Michael Fischer boldly proposed that the Sierra Club redefine *we*:

**“We are faced with a choice: Will we remain a middle-class group of backpackers, overwhelmingly white in membership, program and agenda—and thus condemn ourselves to losing influence in an increasingly multicultural country? Or will we be of service to, of relevance to people of color, combine forces, and strengthen our efforts at our chapter and group level, especially in the localities where environmental and civil rights battles are going to be lost or won?”**

Fischer left the Sierra Club the following year, but the issue he raised is still pertinent, and is grappled with daily throughout the U.S. and among countless organizations.

The year before Fischer's speech, in 1991, the National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit had held its first gathering. Dr. Robert Bullard published his findings that race—not poverty or any other factor—was the key determinant in siting

hazardous waste facilities and dumps. The Environmental Justice movement was launched, defining *we* as people demanding justice and equality to protect their homes and families against racism and environmental degradation. Also in 1991, the Citizens Clearinghouse on Hazardous Waste (CCHW), which grew out of citizen action at Love Canal, held its tenth annual gathering, at which 40 percent of the participants were people of color.

CCHW started with an explicit distinction between “mainstream,” professional, centralized environmental nonprofit corporations, and grassroots activists fighting to protect their homes and families. It’s an interesting coincidence that in the same year CCHW was founded, the top executives of the ten largest environmental 501(c)3 organizations met together for the first time. Organizers of that meeting in the early days of the Reagan years undoubtedly said, “*We* have to work together.” They called themselves The Group of Ten (now The Green Group), and they’ve been meeting together ever since.

The earliest history of the modern environmental movement also reveals roots and consequences of unexamined, divisive assumptions. The concept of national policy to preserve and conserve wilderness areas got a huge boost in the years after Americans stumbled across Yosemite Valley. In 1851, General James Savage led US cavalry into the Valley, to drive out the Ahwahneetchee Indians. They were said to be interfering with minerals exploration. Yosemite was described by a member of the expedition as neatly presenting “the appearance of a well-kept park.”

After the Civil War, John Muir, who would later found the Sierra Club, extolled Yosemite’s scenic values in exalted terms. Other national figures also cited Yosemite as the preeminent example of the need for the preservation of the wilderness. Their work eventually led to the establishment of Yosemite in 1890 as one of the first National Parks.

In 1929, Totuya, the sole survivor of the Ahwahneetchee, then an old woman, went back to Yosemite for the first time since 1851. Looking at the Valley, she shook her head sadly, and said, “Too dirty. Too bushy.” Yosemite had been managed by the



**Totuya telling her story, 1929**

Credit: National Park Service

Ahwahneetchee for wildlife, grass and black oak acorns—and the preservationists had let the area go to seed, becoming overgrown and less park-like. It had looked like a park because in fact it was a park. What Muir viewed as pristine beauty in need of protection—from *us*—resulted in what Totuya saw, from her cultural perspective, only as neglect, by *them*.

The racism that stains America’s social fabric is woven into all of our relations and institutions. Advocates for change are part of the same fabric.

The differences between groups of people organized to protect their homes and their families, as in the work of environmental justice advocates, and professional “mainstream” environmental organizations, can also be described as the difference between

place-based, and issue-based, organizing. For place-based activists, *we* generally means *we here*, or *we people of color* in particular places. For issue-based activists, *we* generally means *we who are concerned about this issue*. This difference keeps people apart and reinforces existing barriers of race, class, ideology and background.

Certainly these problems can't be solved simply by intentional rhetoric to redefine *we*. At the same time, how advocates define themselves is crucial, with enormous implications not only for communications but for how advocates define the issues, identify remedies and strategies, and find new allies. One place to start is for members of the environmental community to stop isolating themselves in their own community and redefine themselves as part of the broader community.

*Advocacy strategy is easily constrained, even misdirected, by corporate assumptions*

## Corporate Communications

Grassroots and community-based advocacy is often ad hoc, or done under the umbrella of an existing community institution. Professional advocacy organizations operate as non-profit tax-exempt corporations.

A corporation is a tool, or technology, for organizing resources. People working in tax-exempt 501(c)3 corporations, committed to a social mission and usually strapped for time and money, tend to be highly conscious of the differences between non-profit and for-profit corporations. But there is much to learn from examining the similarities.

Every technology creates its own requirements of the user, and the corporation, for profit or not, is no exception. People working in advocacy corporations can make better strategic decisions if they are aware of how corporate technology works to influence decisions.

*The corporation must continue to exist.* This is true whatever the product, service or mission of the corporation may be. The corporation is a legal entity, and is, at least theoretically, immortal—designed to outlast its current staff and Board.

*The corporation competes for resources and influence* in an environment of many similar corporations that also are committed to their own continued existence. The customers of advocacy corporations are individual donors, private or corporate foundations and govern-

ment agencies. Whatever the mix of funding sources, each advocacy corporation must compete for their market share. Additionally, they must compete for the attention of gatekeepers of many kinds, including political leaders and news media. Marketing is a necessary interest of the corporation.

*People employed by corporations serve the corporation. They are obliged to speak on behalf of the corporation, not on their own behalf.* This is so fundamental that most officers and executives of corporations, including advocacy groups, rarely consider this except in a crisis situation. This cultivates a habit of speaking on behalf of others, and fuels an assumption that such speech is not only valid, but may be more important and more credible than individuals speaking their own minds.

Together, these corporate mandates shape communications strategies to meet corporate objectives. The over-riding communications objective is to *market* the corporation. Unfortunately, marketing and advocacy communications are not the same, and require very different strategies.

***“It’s amazing what you can accomplish,  
if you don’t care who gets the credit.”  
—Harry Truman***

Getting credit for accomplishment and commitment is important, and marketing involves getting recognition and publicity. As a result, advocacy groups often believe they must get in the media so more people will know about them and their work. “This is our bread and butter,” professional advocates say. “Getting credit for our work is an organizational imperative. Without it we’ll be out of business.”

Too much of the communications strategy of advocates is driven by the unexamined need for credit. In marketing, the definition of *we* serves to distinguish the corporation from its competition. Public recognition of the corporation is necessary so that more resources and influence will accrue. In fact, the nature of the

corporation makes it much more difficult to redefine *we* more broadly in order to shift the terms of debate.

Successfully marketing an advocacy organization often works to reinforce the dominant perception that political advocacy is conducted by branded and positioned organizations pursuing their special interest—getting something for members of their group, protecting their own jobs, or promoting their private agenda. This gives opponents the opening to characterize the debate as the special interests of the advocates versus the interests of the rest of us. No matter what the content of a specific message or campaign of messages, when the assumptions behind advocacy messages are based on a narrow definition of *we* (and what *we* want), communication will tend to work against advancing the advocacy goals of mobilizing new and more diverse people, and influencing the perceptions of decision makers.



**Anti-corporate activists seek to define “us” and “them”**

Credit: ActionMedia

The conflict between corporate marketing objectives and advocacy objectives is largely unrecognized. It’s a subject that never makes it to the agenda, and is therefore not part of communications strategy. As a result, advocacy strategy is easily constrained, even misdirected, by corporate assumptions.

When organizations clarify and separate their marketing and advocacy goals they can develop discrete communications strategies to meet both. Advocates sometimes assume that getting media coverage is crucial to getting new and continued funding. But isolating and identifying the real objective—funding decisions on their behalf—will allow them to see that what’s actually important is not getting credit with the *public*, but rather with the handful of decision makers whose support they need. Advocacy corporations do

not and need not rely on mass news media to communicate with their donors. Further, using mass media for this purpose can actually reduce their effectiveness in accomplishing the results that matter most to their supporters and their mission.

For organizations that depend largely on private foundation grants, it is relatively straightforward to tell grant officers what kind of news media coverage to expect. For example, instead of building a clippings file to show their success, the organization could use media stories and references that demonstrate how advocates have actually *influenced the discussion and definition of the issue* as presented in news media, in terms of the messengers and the story focus that journalists use.

Such a strategy was used by environmentalists in San Diego who won the active support of organized labor for a greenbelt proposal. The news stories were about labor leaders demanding better investment of public dollars in maintaining existing infrastructure and limiting development on the outward fringe of the region. The environmental groups recruited the support of labor, and worked to make labor the most visible player in the news coverage. The environmental groups also met their marketing need with funders, by explaining their strategy (to enlist labor support) in advance and then demonstrating their results—through press clippings, union newsletters, and ultimately in policy change.

There may be enormous internal resistance within the corporation to separating the marketing and advocacy objectives. General resistance to change, and fear that corporate objectives won't be met; existing corporate practices, such as the job description (expectations and assumptions) of the communications staff; even how communications budgets are developed and allocated, all contribute to the inertia. Personal ego plays a role as well. People like to see their name or organization in the newspaper—it feels good to get credit.

Organizations can only deal with the differences between marketing and advocacy needs through a conscious, sustained effort, and with honest discussion of the implications. Such discussion starts with a willingness to challenge assumptions, including ideas about who *we* are. It's not easy work. But it can be done.

*Anyone who breathes air,  
drinks water, or feeds themselves  
can be a credible spokesperson  
for the environment.*

## What We Can Do

### ***Stop. Listen. Think.***

When people are under pressure, it's hard to stop and plan. In organized work settings, the periodic "retreat" is almost the only opportunity people take to reflect on what they're doing, and what they want to do in the future. When the retreat ends and work resumes on Monday, opportunity for reflection and asking critical questions often ends, as well.

To become better communicators, we have to be better listeners. Effective communication isn't just from the sender to the receiver. We have to hear and understand what our intended audiences already know and say, and what they don't say: the assumptions they hold about us, about the concern at hand, and, most importantly, the assumptions they share with us. It is hard to listen to part of what we are told, without overlaying our own assumptions, and prematurely jumping to our own conclusions. Instead we have to listen for the conclusions of the people talking.

Learning to be better listeners is critical, because unless we convince others that we really care about what they have to say (proven only by listening), we won't get beyond the superficial ideas and language, down to the underlying values and perspectives.

People intentionally speaking out for change can begin with listening critically to themselves, and each other, examining informal as well as public speech for the story behind the words. Advocates can

simply ask each other, “Who do we mean by *we*? What story does that tell? Who else is in the story? Who ought to be?”

Such reflection is the beginning of a research plan. To speak on behalf of people who will benefit, we need to learn how they speak on their own behalf. Who should we be hearing from, and how can we? Active listening is qualitative research, whether through community organizing, individual interviews, focus groups, reviews of prior research, or combinations of techniques. A fundamental question for people working for change always is, *what are the shared values and assumptions of the people who will stand to benefit?*

Understanding this allows communicators to recognize and build from existing assumptions, in each and in all communication.

This kind of listening, to frame the story *before* trying to tell it, applies at every stage of communications. An example of how not listening to others can weaken the story is seen in a press release from the Union of Concerned Scientists, about their automotive fuel economy report in February 2002:

**Raising fuel economy standards could create 187,200 jobs in construction, automobile, service, retail and other industries...the auto industry and their suppliers will see 41,000 additional jobs...fuel economy will be the engine for economic growth.**

The only person quoted in the release was a UCS spokesperson. There was no indication that anyone in the auto industry or in the service, construction, or retail sectors, understands that cleaner cars might be in their economic interests. If this release, and report, had been organized around its central premise that cleaner more efficient cars will be in everyone’s interest, it would have been more powerful. The *we* calling for fuel economy improvements could have included many types of messengers, and the report might have generated more action as a result. Certainly including different interests and messengers would have taken more work, looking outside the “environmental community” for likely allies, before beginning the research, and especially before writing the report.

Consider again the example from NPR news on the natural gas pipeline, in which the reporter said:

**...what may be even more compelling about this project is, there’s little in the way of opposition, even from the environmental community, which has finally found a development project it can back...**

Followed by an environmental group’s spokesman saying:

**I think most environmental groups recognize that you won't wean yourself off the filthiest fuel we have—coal—unless we use more natural gas to run our power plants, and there's lots of it in Alaska ...**

Obviously, no interviewee, no matter how well versed in their subject, can control which remarks the reporter will use, or how the reporter intends to tell the story. But, they can control what they say. In the situation above, an environmental advocate who had worked through the definitions of *we* might have offered instead, in answer to a question like “Why are environmentalists supporting this development?”:

**Coal is the filthiest fuel we have. There are plenty of reasons to end our reliance on it, but everyone knows we can't do it all at once. We have to make a transition to cleaner electricity. Using cleaner natural gas to run our power plants makes sense...**

Similarly, a reporter might challenge a wind energy advocate about the inability of wind power to replace all current fuel sources. The advocate who has thought through *we* won’t offer an automatic defensive response such as:

**Environmentalists aren't saying we should go to 100 percent wind power for electricity.**

But might say instead:

**No one is suggesting that wind can supply 100 percent of our electricity. But everyone in this wind-producing region...**

Such responses, especially in the context of a reporter’s interview, do not come from carefully worded and memorized sound bites. They are the result of thinking about the issue in broad terms, and

using that understanding in private as well as public speech. Reporters ask questions based in their own perspective. When talking to an environmental advocate they anticipate a quote characteristic of the “environmental community.” Unless advocates incorporate the broader perspective into the way they think and understand their issue, it will be impossible to consistently talk about it from a new perspective, much less get a reporter looking at it in a new way.

### *Speak in many voices*

What if environmentalists set themselves a different goal for news media coverage? Over the next two to five years, instead of pursuing media exposure and publicity, they could work to change the way the news is presented. They could try to decrease their own prominence as spokespeople and characters in the story. They could work to create more coverage of environmental issues, at local and national levels, on broad policy and on specific local decisions, featuring the people doing something on behalf of the environment as a broad range of members of the community, not specialists or a special interest group.

Recruiting new and unexpected messengers in no way implies that professional environmental advocates should shut their mouths or their doors. In fact, in many cases, it doesn't even mean that spokespeople have to come from outside the organization. The Board of Directors of a 501(c)3 corporation is composed of concerned people with a range of backgrounds and a variety of expertise. Any of these individuals can be quoted by a reporter, and identified as a Board member of the organization, and still help redefine who speaks for the environment, by speaking from their own experience and place in society.

As a pastor of this church, I believe we all have a responsibility...

I own a hardware store downtown. Small businesses are under tremendous pressure already. And now, to have our tax money subsidize this giant company for an activity few of us in the community want...

As the principal of the elementary school, I have the privilege of listening to children every day. They ask me, 'Why can't we swim in the river?' What do you think I should tell them?

The Natural Resources Defense Council used an intentional strategy to define *we* in a news release issued in early 2004:

Note that Tweeti Blancett is identified as “a rancher” first, and as a citizen activist from within that identity. This is the way most citizen activists think of themselves. The release represents an intentional strategy on the part of the NRDC, to define *we* as *those of us who live and work here*—notably, ranchers and landowners.

Anyone who breathes air, drinks water, or feeds themselves can be a credible spokesperson for the environment. Empowering messengers means helping them speak, in public, from their own perspective and experience, from their particular point of view, as ranchers, employers and taxpayers, kids, parents, workers and neighbors. These are messengers who can be encouraged to step up to the microphone.

Many citizens are already talking in public about these issues, of course. They write to their elected representatives, they organize in neighborhood and community groups to solve problems, and they participate as members of national organizations with local chapters.

## **Broad Coalition Sends Message to BLM: Do Oil & Gas Right Ranchers, Tribal Chapters, Conservationists push for stronger protections in the San Juan Basin Farmington, New Mexico—**

A diverse coalition of ranchers, local Navajo governments and environmental groups joined together to change the Bureau of Land Management's decision to authorize nearly 10,000 new oil and gas wells in the San Juan Basin...

“The BLM is approving massive new development, yet they are clearly not able to handle the soil, range, water, air and wildlife impacts that are overwhelming communities throughout the Basin from the existing development alone,” said Tweeti Blancett, a rancher in the Basin and a member of the San Juan Citizens Alliance. “Without intervention, this new development will take place on the backs of ranchers, landowners and residents of this Basin.”

Advocacy organizations too often think of these people as increasing the size of the membership or alert list, rather than as potential messengers who could broaden the perspectives and voices in the story.

**WASHINGTON (AP)  
(March 19, 2003)—**

Sen. Norm Coleman kept a campaign promise Wednesday and voted against allowing oil drilling in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, but the Minnesota Republican said he would have voted for it if he could have secured more money for renewable energy...

"I'm passionate about renewables," Coleman said. "I think it's both an economic development issue for Minnesota farmers and I think it's an environmental issue." ...Coleman said he received much more pressure from the environmental community—6,000 calls, e-mails and letters opposed to drilling. He said the White House did not lobby him on the proposal.

Senator Coleman uses the phrase "environmental community" to mean anyone who contacted him in opposition to the proposed drilling. Although Coleman said he views this as both an "economic development... and... environmental issue," he never suggests any of the 6,000 calls, letters and e-mails came from anyone concerned with economic development. Coleman names, as the single pressure, the same "environmental community" that most readers already have identified as *not me*, but a special interest lobbying group.

Senator Coleman could have said he received 6,000 calls, e-mails and letters from teachers, doctors, construction workers,

small business owners and farmers across his state—but he didn't. Perhaps it's too much to hope that he might have, if the campaign had been organized that way. It's easy to imagine that Coleman absorbed and was acting on the advice of the Luntz environmental memo to the Republican National Committee when he used "environmental community," rhetorically, to marginalize the environmental position even as he votes to support it.

Perhaps if the Coleman/ANWR campaign had been organized and talked about to emphasize the range of interests opposed to drilling, then any of the 6,000 contacts from citizens could have been opportunity to reset the terms about *who* is involved in the issue. The opponents to drilling could help these messengers speak out in public, in their neighborhoods, workplaces, and diverse media, portraying the issue as a broad concern rather than a special concern of the environmentalists.

### ***Be the media***

Professional advocates working with news outlets tend to think of "the Media" as a distinct communications challenge, requiring its own messages and communications strategy. News media certainly do require attention—they have power in establishing the terms of discussion. But, the terms are not set by journalists and editors alone. Every public utterance, whether a presentation, a meeting, or a news release, has the potential to shift the terms. The broad public discourse, including the assumptions journalists work from, shifts as more speakers tell their story and add a broader perspective.

Advocates can play a serious role as publishers and reporters. In 1776, the Declaration of Independence proclaimed, "We... solemnly publish and declare that these united colonies are, and of right ought to be free and independent states." Publish, at that time, meant to state in public, through whatever medium, be it the public square, a public house, or the printing press. With development of mass media and then concentration of ownership and media monopolies, access to the public discourse steadily narrowed. But today, anyone can be a publisher—of flyers, pamphlets, photos, booklets, websites, videos, etc. We have more means available to enter the public discourse than ever before.

Publishing, whether with ink or on the web, gives advocates the opportunity to work as reporters. As reporters, advocates can call someone—a potential ally, someone who's said or done something useful, a policy maker, or an opponent—and ask them questions for possible use in an upcoming publication, news release, etc. This is an extremely powerful and under-utilized tool for advocacy communications. It has a wide range of applications, including recruiting messengers and educating journalists.

What would the local TV meteorologist say about climate change? What might the insurance salesman say about flood control? What would the County Commissioner say about continued inaction from the state? As publishers and reporters, advocates can find out—by asking them. Find out the official position of an industry association spokesperson. Find out what a farmer, a nurse, a bus driver, a banker would say. Perhaps someone in the organization's own membership would have something to say, from their own experiences. Working as reporters teaches advocates to tell stories based on broad definitions of *we*. Those stories and publications can then be made available to target audiences, including constituents, allies and opponents, as well as professional journalists.

Advocates in their role as publishers and reporters meet and can recruit new messengers. When they do, they can give new and additional sources to other journalists working in the news media. An advocate might interview someone that has something useful to say, and then simply switch hats and ask:

**If I drafted a letter to the editor or a guest Op Ed based on what you've just told me, would you consider submitting it to the newspaper? Or, would you be willing to tell your colleagues what you just told me, perhaps in a meeting, or an industry publication? Or, who do you think could help get the word out?**

These new messengers can be coached to be explicit with journalists about the working definition of *we*:

**If you use this conversation, I'd like you to identify me as a nurse at Regional Hospital and mother of three. Please don't call me 'an environmentalist,' because I'm not sure what you or your readers might mean by that.**

When someone speaks as suggested above, it will inevitably produce news stories that include the line, “[This Person], who doesn't want to be called an environmentalist...” Although some journalists may do this once, or even twice, they will soon get the message, and start to look more carefully at how they are describing people in their story.

Leaders of environmental organizations can also be explicit about this with reporters, especially in conversation with journalists with

whom they have a working relationship. Representatives of environmental organizations have worked hard to make themselves available as sources to the press. But they always have a choice, either to do the interview, or to recommend better (as in broader or more diverse) sources and background material to the reporter. Advocates may fear this would lead the reporter to call someone at the environmental organization down the street, and sometimes it might. But the leader at that organization, too, could be prepared to say,

**I want to help you with this story, and I really think it would be better if you talk to Messengers X & Y—can I put you in touch with them? It's crucial to hear their perspective, because that's what this issue is really about.**

Representatives of organizations also can give quotes that broaden the story by repeating what someone else says.

**Q: Why does your environmental organization oppose the Army Corps proposal?**

**A: Some of our members are farmers, and they say...**

**A: I can tell you what one of the big resort owners told me...**

**A: According to the Congressional audit...**

Working with journalists is an opportunity to educate them about the terms of discussion, help them recognize assumptions, and, ultimately, to tell a more powerful story. Imagine stories about vital environmental issues where no one quoted is identified as an environmentalist, only ranchers, nurses, scientists and others expressing their concerns.

### ***Listen***

Anyone who examines their own assumptions about *we* will be well equipped to hear how others are talking about shared concerns and possible solutions. To shift the terms of discussion, advocates can challenge others to be clear and explicit about who they're speaking for, and who's left out. Just as the citizens opposing the Rapids Power plant did, advocates can challenge opponents:

**When you say we are going to benefit, who do you mean by we?**

A sustained effort to influence the terms of discussion can be measured by the echoes created. When advocates hear their own language and assumptions used by others, it's an echo of their own efforts. Every time someone communicates in public, using the advocates' intentional assumptions and definitions, the public discourse can be moved in the right direction. Even though the advocates did not directly generate the message, they set the terms. Each echo creates new opportunity—to amplify the message or bring it to the attention of certain people, to recruit new allies and messengers in response or solidarity, and to forward the advocacy communications and strategy in light of these new opportunities.

Defining *we* is, above all, a process. For a broader definition to take hold and make a difference, it has to be maintained throughout all communications, internally and externally. Advocates for a wide range of positive social changes, including environmental policy, are already engaged in this work every day. As more attention is paid to the underlying questions, and to telling stories that are more inclusive, people working for change will increase their reach and their power.

To build for positive change, we have to cross the barriers that divide us. To win power, we have to understand and name the opposition. Effective advocacy communications are based on effective listening. If we listen carefully, to ourselves and to others, we can all speak in public, for the common good.

ActionMedia provides communications training, research and consultation services to advocates for positive social change.

This little book, about a little word that can make a big difference, was produced with the help and patience of many people, and the support of The McKnight Foundation.

We welcome questions, comments, and additional examples, as the conversation continues.

Dick Brooks  
Michael Goldberg

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