Targeting as a Mode of Science Communication: Principles, Issues and a Practical Example

Greg Holland* and Jonathan Vigh

National Center for Atmospheric Research Earth System Laboratory, Boulder, CO

1 Introduction

- Today's fractured media landscape contains a rich and diverse range of communications opportunities
- Pitfalls abound, but the diversity provides opportunities for ***targeted science communications***
- Such an approach requires a ***careful framing of the message*** in terms familiar to the targeted group, including: immediacy, economics, culture, community leaders, emotions, and ideology.
- Here we elaborate on ***our approach to targeting and framing*** together with lessons learnt in the context of a practical example of working with a religious community.

"When assessing the risks and benefits of new technologies, scientists and engineers should account for the non-technical and value-based concerns of the public in addition to technical concerns."
(Mooney 2010)

2 Our Targeting Approach

Identify communities through a triage prioritization:

- Will the approach result in ***genuine communication and understanding***?
- Resist the inclination to target groups that are already well informed, or fully in agreement, and,
- Avoid groups who are engaging purely for irrelevant reasons, such as politics or self promotion.

Use a ***frame*** that is:

- Familiar and comprehensible to the selected community, and,
- Compatible with their perceptions of risk (Leiserowitz 2007)

Take a ***long-term view***, moving carefully from 'get to know you', to dialogue, and then to serious 2-way discussion.

*Corresponding author: Greg Holland (gholland@ucar.edu)
NCAR is sponsored by NSF.

3 Target Community, Message and Frame

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Boulder:
"How can we improve communications between the church and scientists?"

- Their frame is complex and based around a strong and literal belief in the Bible including: **Creation, the Second Coming, family, and stewardship**
- Their community includes scientists and medical professionals
- They have a culture of debate and active discussion.

4 "Getting to Know You"

Introductions:

- One of us (Jonathan) is both an atmospheric scientist and a member of the church -- this enabled an excellent means of introduction.

The first meeting was with the church elders:

- Started off polite but very formal
- The elders were interested, but wary of high-handed scientists
- A single humorous incident involving Creation, quite unplanned, provided the ice-breaker.

The second meeting was with the pastor and a medical doctor:

- To plan a discussion session with the congregation,
- Session scheduled scheduled at the church following the Sabbath service and a pot-luck lunch; open to all interested members of the congregation
- It was agreed that all topics were allowed, and that both sides would be respectful of the views of the others.

5 Panel and Discussion Session

Involved:

- Two scientists and two church members (including the pastor)
- Moderation by Jonathan as a member of the congregation
- A series of topics related to the main question
- An extensive and lively discussion in which many topics came up, **including differing views on potentially contentious issues such as Creation and evolution.**

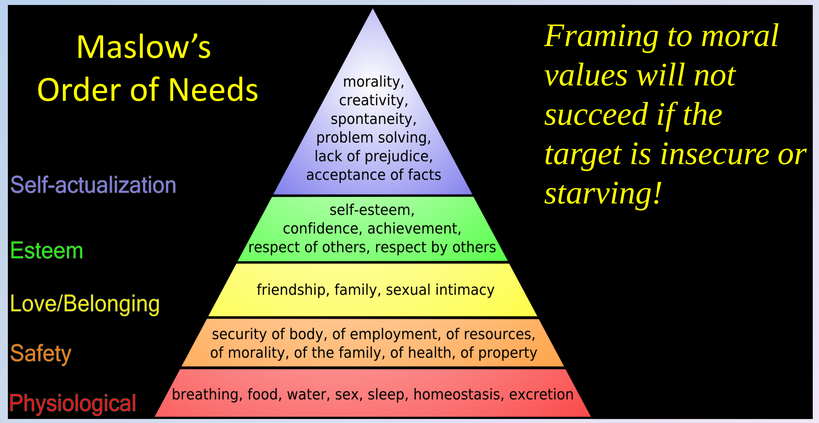
The lead-up was of considerable importance:

- The scientists came to the service and joined in the pot luck
- The pastor introduced the scientists at the service and expressed his support for the interaction.

The next session will address climate change in the frame of "Stewardship of a Changing Planet". Continuing get-togethers are planned.

6 Lessons Learnt

- ***Do not preach – listening is vital to engage in a real dialogue.***
- The **frames** that worked were **stewardship** and **family**
- Careful attention to the getting-to-know-you stage is critical
- **Open and honest discussion on contentious topics works**, so long as participants realize that not all views are compatible
- If the message is communicated and framed well, and the targeted group give it serious consideration, the meeting is considered a success
- ***It is then up to the target group to factor this new information in alongside their many other priorities***.



References

Leiserowitz, A., 2007: Communicating the Risks of Global Warming: American Risk Perceptions, Affective Images, and Interpretive Communities. *Creating a Climate for Change*, Cambridge, ISBN 978-0-521-86923-2, 44-63.

Mooney, C., 2010: *Do Scientists Understand the Public?* American Academy of Sciences, 17 pp. www.amacad.org/publications/scientistsunderstand.aspx