

## Communications Checklist for Reviewing Your Messaging 2010

Integrating new understandings and research findings into your communications work is not an easy task. USITW has found that the simple expedient of a having checklist – a series of questions to ask yourself as you look at your existing or planned communications – can help communicators begin to reexamine assumptions, see things in a different light, become conscious about decisions that might otherwise be made on the basis of habit or instinct.

### Creating a more favorable context for your arguments

Multiple streams of research show that a public conversation shaped by fear and concerns about safety – especially concerns about the threat of dire harm to oneself, one’s loved ones, or the country from hostile “others” – puts advocates for a farsighted, comprehensive and cooperative foreign policy at a serious disadvantage. This doesn’t mean progressive advocates should not talk at all about security, but it does mean advocates need to make some careful choices about how and when to tell a security-related “story.”

The following questions are designed to help you make strategic communications choices that reflect research findings. Not every question will be applicable in every circumstance, and advocates may deliberately decide to go in a different direction than is suggested in some instances. The point of the questions is to help ensure that such decisions are made consciously and with an awareness of their likely implications.

Some questions to ask yourself:

1. Are our communications **inadvertently reinforcing big ideas that help our opponents?** Remember that policy issues and policy proposals are not “big ideas” in this sense. Big ideas are what a non-expert listener, hearing this message for the first time, would conclude it was “about.”

Does this message trigger strong concerns about personal safety? Does it evoke a state of emergency, or a dangerous world full of implacable enemies?

Could a listener conclude that we’re asking him or her to put principles/morality first (i.e., ahead of safety), because it’s the right thing to do?

Do any of our messaging choices risk unwittingly reinforcing negative stereotypes about progressives and/or advocates (e.g., caring more about morality or domestic priorities than about foreign policy/security priorities)?

2. **How are we talking about security?** Are we emphasizing the potential for positive outcomes, countries working together to tackle shared problems, having realistic confidence in the availability of good solutions? Are we helping listeners to understand global interconnectedness?
3. In describing America’s role in the world, are we **emphasizing teamwork and team leadership** – or are we showing America taking the lead alone, possibly sacrificing its safety or its “blood and treasure” in order to inspire others?
4. Have we considered whether there could be a more effective entry point for our arguments? Are we assuming that we *have* to debate within the Safety Frame, for example, when we actually could try to **replace that frame with a more effective frame**?

Are there opportunities to bridge from the Safety Frame to a different frame? What would happen if we began by saying, “The real issue here is...”?

5. Does our message help people **see a bigger picture than they typically see**? Have we explored opportunities to make our issue part of a larger cluster of concerns?

## Encouraging people to think about your issue in a new way

Some recent research indicates that many of the default ways of thinking about security issues and foreign policy, in general, are unhelpful. This is true not only of certain familiar, big conceptual frameworks (like “in an emergency, we may have to sacrifice some rights for the sake of security”), but also of the specific scenarios that automatically get evoked when discussion turns to these issues (like the “ticking time bomb” scenario that comes to mind when torture is debated). Even positive concepts that advocates are trying to advance (like the notion that “we can be secure and still uphold our values”) may have become so familiar to people that they no longer have much of an impact. Helping people to see things differently, in some fresh and more helpful light, is an important strategy for more effective communications.

A few questions to ask yourself:

1. Have we offered explanations and examples that will give people **something new to think about**, or have we relied on familiar stories and arguments?
2. Have we helped people to “connect the dots” – or have we just asserted our own beliefs and understandings about why an issue matters? Do our communications explain **how and why** America’s policy choices have the consequences we believe they have (for example, by offering what one of USITW’s research partners, Topos, calls “causal mechanisms”)?
3. Do our messages give contextual/systemic understanding of the problems and the solutions so listeners know what the U.S. should do... and what they can do to help?

## Talking so you can be heard by the “persuadable middle” of the public

Drawing on current and past work by communications researchers, U.S. in the World has compiled a few questions that are designed to help advocates “talk so they can be heard” by people who have not already made their minds up about the issues and who do not follow policy debates particularly closely. As USITW has pointed out in other contexts, this is an opportunity for advocates to equip members of their “base” to reach out to family and friends who are not yet convinced of the importance of the issues or the merits of progressive policy proposals.

Here are a handful of things to keep in mind:

1. Are we using language that works for the “converted” but not for the “persuadable middle”? **What messages are we encouraging our supporters (including policymakers) to repeat** when they advocate on behalf of our issues?
2. Are we **speaking in a reasonable, practical tone** that enables people to take in new information – as opposed to a rhetorical, ideological, partisan tone that may encourage people to dismiss our arguments as “politics as usual” or “more of the same”?
3. Are we **demonstrating our concern for the wellbeing of the United States**, in ways that are credible and fresh – not rote?
4. Are we giving people a way to criticize America’s leaders and their policy choices **without calling the entire American character into question**?
5. Are we **empowering people by offering or implying a policy solution**, or are we just criticizing? Are we allowing people to conceive of a positive outcome, telling people what the U.S. can do that will work better?
6. Are we using **simple, vivid language**, with metaphors and analogies that help people understand the issues and arguments – or are we relying on jargon and “wonkspeak”?