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Communicating Human Rights: New Opinion Research and Effective Messaging

Monday, January 28, 2008, 1:30 – 3:00 pm

Facilitator:

Gopal Dayaneni, Progressive Communications Network

Panelists:

Larry Cox, Executive Director, Amnesty International USA

Alan Jenkins, Executive Director, Opportunity Agenda

Alan Jenkins said the public opinion research was prompted by a need to understand how to communicate on and build public support for human rights in the United States. He described the methodology employed in the Opportunity Agenda's 2007 human rights opinion research, conducted in partnership with Belden Russonello & Stewart, a DC-based research and communications firm. The survey included conversations with domestic human rights and social justice advocates; a review of media reporting; a national poll over-sampled for Asian Americans and including Spanish language capacity; focus groups in three cities; and informal conversations with journalists.

Alan discussed a range of compelling findings from the research. (The report and an executive summary can be found at: www.opportunityagenda.org/site/c.mwL5KkN0LvH/b.2265563/) A few highlights he shared include: the notion of human rights is very clear and Americans have no trouble applying it to the U.S.; human rights are understood as a set of ideals and values, not as a set of laws and mechanisms; Americans see government as a protector of human rights but are reluctant to see the government as a provider of these rights; human rights should be pursued gradually, not aggressively; a large plurality agree that the U.S. should not sign international treaties as they pose a threat to our sovereignty; and people have concerns about cultural relativism – on some level a rejection of colonialism but also posing a threat to the idea of universal, fundamental human rights.

Respondents generally identified the need to treat people fairly, and the principle of living in a society where human rights are both respected and viewed as inalienable as key reasons to uphold human rights in the United States. They also felt most strongly about the following human rights as relevant to the U.S.: equal opportunity irrespective of gender and race, fair treatment in the criminal justice system, freedom from discrimination, freedom from torture, right to a quality education, access to health care, living in a clean environment, fair pay for workers, and right to privacy. Smaller majorities of respondents also felt strongly about freedom from extreme poverty, right to adequate housing, right to economic opportunity, and abortion. Respondents were almost evenly split on providing illegal immigrants medical assistance.

To the question of how the social justice movement can take advantage of the opportunities as presented by the opinion research findings as well as bridge the contradictions, Larry Cox responded that we must move away from a theoretical debate of if human rights apply in the United States. He felt that the opinion research confirmed that the American public believes in their relevance, but now needs to see social justice work and victories couched in human rights language. He cited the example of Amnesty International-USA's campaign on violence directed towards Native American women that reports on the violence as a human rights issue and calls for government accountability.

Alan explained that a human rights messaging strategy should be targeted towards the various clusters of human rights supporters. These included the "human rights champions," "young cautious human rights supporters," and "U.S. human rights supporters." Alan emphasized the need to constantly reach out to and educate the human rights champions, and in all cases to lead with values rather than international mechanisms and treaties. He contrasted these clusters with those that are actively against us – the "anti-U.N.-ites" and "bedrock conservatives." (these two categories only form 31% of the public.)

To the idea of leading with values, Larry agreed that we must message human rights as the values for which this country stands and that enable us to feel positive about our country. He said that "America I Believe In" has been a successful campaign for Amnesty International-USA because it was a simple idea that stressed internal values. He also explained that as the human rights movement got more professional it began to emphasize international law and covenants, which inadvertently drove people away from the idea that you just need to be a human being to understand the movement. If you explain international law as simply codifying our values it would not feel as if it were imposing new and foreign standards, but rather providing enforcement mechanisms for values we already believe in.

Gopal Dayaneni asked the panelists how we ensure that our framing of our human rights becomes the dominant one, given everyone is currently touting human rights. Alan stressed the need for message discipline and repetition. He also felt that we must invest in communications capacity that allows organizations to message effectively without taking away from their overall work. He urged funders to invest in trainings that allow activists to better understand what human rights means, as well as case studies of how to use human rights in domestic social justice work and specifically how it has made a difference.

A participant asked how general the reaction is against our courts citing to decisions and judgments overseas. Larry felt that there is a distinction between the "danger" of citing to foreign courts and the importance of how the U.S. is viewed in the world and our own self-image. Americans do not want to be hated all over the world and be seen as a rogue regime, instead they want to believe that the U.S. is leading the way with regard to democracy, freedom and justice. The painful realization that the world increasingly views the U.S. in negative terms is an opportunity for a different kind of posture for the U.S. in an international context; and while we may hesitate to cite to foreign courts, we also want to be seen as equal to any other country in terms of our respect for human rights.

Another participant asked Alan how much the opinion research cost and queried further on the stubbornness to ratify treaties. Alan explained that the six-part opinion research cost \$200,000. With regard to the polarization on treaties, he said that some people think the U.S. is unlike any other country and do not trust an international system, it therefore is not surprising that treaty ratification is as polarizing as it is. He added however that if our constitution contained as many protections as the

general populace thought it did, we would not actually need human rights. Larry added that there is a highly organized, determined group of Congressional members who will continue blocking treaty ratification, while those that support it have yet to mobilize in the same way. He said that we must mount a more coordinated campaign, while still leading with values.

In response to how the human rights framework enables bridge building across silos, Larry explained that human rights does not eliminate the “focus” of silos, but rather enables activists to enlist those with another focus to join them and work on a broader set of framework issues. Alan pointed to the shadow reporting efforts for the CERD review process as an example of advocates working across issues, but all linked by human rights.

The last question was about who the effective messengers would be of a human rights message, and who funders should support to take this message forward. Alan felt that faith leaders play an important role in talking about values, as do those that can tell a systematic story. He called this latter group “empowered change agents,” and offered the example of a physician who sees a number of people attempt to access health care and can therefore talk about the entire system rather than individuals. He also noted the effect of international NGOs examining human rights in the United States. Both Gopal and Larry also added the importance of disseminating the human rights frame across larger communities and supporting it as a powerful, prominent frame.

Finally, in his wrap up, Alan reminded funders that the opinion research contained the good news that Americans feel positive about human rights, but are worried about the international system. He said that we have a remarkable opportunity to cast human rights in our language, before our opponents adopt human rights for themselves and redefine it. He emphasized that we must invest in the “bricks and mortar” of communications capacity. Larry agreed that we are at a unique moment and that we must invest very heavily in a communications strategy that builds on what people know and are already doing.