



Framing the Food System: a Review for Animal Advocates of FrameWorks Institute's Foundational Study

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This is the first in a series of five reports on a multi-phase messaging study for animal advocates. The full series is available at paxfauna.org/reports

Introduction

The Frameworks Institute is a nonprofit research organization specializing in political messaging to help “mission-driven organizations build public will for progressive change.” Their methods are based on insights from psychology and cognitive sciences. In 2006, FrameWorks published their findings from a multi-staged investigation into the challenges of communicating for food system change and how to overcome them. FrameWorks’ goal was to identify frames and messages which could generate support for public policy interventions or other system-level interventions into food production industries. While the report was not concerned with animal suffering or even animal agriculture in particular, many of its insights into how the public relates to food are directly relevant for animal advocates wishing to see a change in the food system.

This report summarizes the conclusions relevant to farmed animal advocates from each section of FrameWorks’ report.



Just the Headlines, Please

Across several diverse research methods, certain trends consistently emerged. The most important recurring themes animal advocates should take from FrameWorks' report are:

- **The public is trapped in a cycle of ignorance regarding the food system.** On one hand, the public is highly ignorant about the food supply chain except for the short distance between grocery store shelves and their kitchen. While they lack information, two counterproductive frames dominate their understanding of food and prevent them from learning new information. These are the *consumer* frame and the *modernization* frame. Lacking greater information about the system as a whole, the public is unable to form a new mental model of the system, keeping them trapped in a cycle of ignorance. Furthermore, they often choose to remain ignorant rather than risk the discomfort they experience when learning about the problems of the food system.
- **The *consumer* frame is the greatest obstacle to big-picture thinking.** When Americans think about food, they think about their personal, direct experience with it. Because they spend so much time with food, they feel they have a complete mental model and do not feel they are lacking information about the larger system. Through this lens, strong values of *personal choice*, *freedom*, *autonomy*, and *agency* create resistance to any kind of systemic intervention. For instance, they oppose government policies to shape what food is available and are resistant to learning about the role government policy already plays in shaping their food choices.
- **The *modernization* frame creates further cynicism.** When pressed, Americans can deduce that the bucolic images they have of farming are anachronistic, and they can make reasonably accurate (if often exaggerated) inferences about how the modern food system must work. However, through this lens, they are even more cynical about the possibility of systemic change, seeing modernization as an inevitable and necessary process that to oppose is naïve.
- **Advocates rely on vocabulary which is meaningless to the general public.** Words like *sustainability*, *social justice*, *food justice*, and *slow food* appear often in advocate materials without any explanation. Yet these words mean almost nothing to the intended audience.
- **Health is a common concern about food, but it keeps people locked in counterproductive frames.** Simple surveys show that health is the leading food-related concern. However, this doesn't mean advocates should appeal to health. In fact, health appeals decreased public support for government intervention because views about health are closely tied to personal choice and responsibility. When researchers identified reframes that were able to focus attention on the system as a whole,



including health language made these messages less effective. Advocates targeting systemic change should avoid appeals to consumer health.

- **The intermittent appearance of food issues in the media cements the perception that all is well.** The public sees problems with the food system as following a regular pattern: advocates expose an issue, the media covers it, and the government steps in to solve it using existing laws. This narrative hinges on several cooperating assumptions, such as the belief that if the media moves on from a story, it is because the issue has been dealt with. However, it means that attempts by animal advocates to break into the media cycle with specific episodes of cruelty at specific locations are likely counterproductive to their goals.
- **The public has favorable views of food industry actors.** Grocery stores, restaurants, and farms consistently rank among the industries with the highest favorability ratings. People trust these actors because they do not see any evidence of problems in their lived experience with food. They feel a degree of loyalty to food providers and can perceive criticism as disloyal. Keep in mind, however...
- **Small Family Farms (SFFs) and Large Industrial Farms (LIFs) are two completely distinct categories in the public imagination.** When the public hears “farm” or “farmer,” they almost invariably picture SFFs. LIFs are usually not described as farms at all. The public prefers SFFs but does not see them as realistically capable of feeding the world. LIFs are seen as a necessary evil.
- **A strategic reframe immediately increased understanding and support from the public.** Through their research, FrameWorks recommends a message appealing to the *legacy* frame (e.g. ‘leaving the world better than we found it’) and using the *runaway food system* metaphor. The *runaway* metaphor provides an image of the food system as a whole, a force that will cause unacceptable damage unless it is brought under control. Together, the *legacy* frame and the *runaway* metaphor inhibit the *consumer* and *modernization* frames and enable productive, systemic thinking about the food system. A message using these two elements performed strongly in a national survey and outperformed all other candidates.



Section 1: Meta-Analysis of Prior Research

The first section[5] of FrameWorks' report is a review and interpretation of relevant public opinion research which existed at the time. Most items in FrameWorks' sample were published between 1999 and 2005. Here are the findings most relevant to animal advocates. Notably, many of their conclusions are similar to codes that emerged from our own sample, suggesting some aspects of public opinion around food have remained stable over the last two decades. On the other hand, some insights which would be relevant have been supplanted by more recent research, suggesting changes over time (e.g. a significant increase in awareness of antibiotic overuse on factory farms). Those points have largely been omitted for simplicity.

- **“Americans have strongly positive perceptions of various actors in the food system.”** Restaurants, grocery stores, and farms were consistently given among the highest approval ratings when listed alongside other industries. (Our own sample confirms this as recently as 2020. [48])
- **“The public is convinced that obesity is a serious public health issue. However, the obesity frame is not conducive to building support for public policies, because people view food as a matter of consumer choice.”** Overall, Americans were greatly concerned with health as it relates to food. Health was the primary way the media discussed food. But while (for instance) 93% of adults thought obesity was a serious problem (58% very serious), this concern did not translate into support for government intervention. Instead, the discussion of food and health focused on personal choice and obscured the food system. People were resistant to connecting issues they see as fundamentally about personal choice to any kind of collective action.

Presented with two statements, only 29% say snack food “is junk food, is costing Americans billions of dollars in healthcare costs due to child obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and high blood pressure, and should be discouraged by the government through labeling laws, warnings and taxes,” while 67% “say that snack food is a matter of consumer choice and that a small group of Americans should not impose their eating habits on the rest of the country.” Furthermore, fully 83% say that obese individuals are responsible (51% very responsible), while far fewer hold food manufacturers responsible, even when given a reason – “because of the serving size and fat and sugar content of their products” (52% responsible, 14% very responsible). When forced to choose whether food manufacturers or consumers are responsible, the public overwhelmingly sides with consumer choice. Only 14% think “food manufacturers should be required by law to reduce serving sizes and fat and sugar content to make their products healthier,” while 83% say “it is up to individual consumers to choose healthy food products.”



- **One type of government intervention the public already supported was policies providing more information to consumers.** While the public overwhelmingly opposed restrictive laws such as sin taxes or portion limits, there was similarly lopsided support for requiring health-related warning labels or mandating restaurants publish calorie counts. There was evidence of support for restrictive policies protecting children in particular, but this support evaporated on contact with opposition narratives focusing on freedom/free speech or parental rights and responsibilities.
- **Organic food had a very positive image, but it is undermined by high cost.** Most consumers reported very favorable views of organic food, but few of them bought it regularly due to cost. Alternative meat proponents are already aware that cost is a major issue, but this reinforces that reality, suggesting that if public discomfort with cultivated meat is transformed, high cost will still be a barrier.
- **The public was ambivalent about GMO plant foods, but staunchly hostile to genetically modifying farmed animals.** While advocates might be relieved that the public was intolerant of genetically modifying farmed animals, this finding foreshadowed many of the negative reactions now documented to cultivated meat.
- **However, the public trusted that food being sold in grocery stores, and prepared for school lunches, was safe, healthy, and well-regulated.** For instance, many people expressed concern about GMOs until learning how widespread they are, at which point they pivoted to assuming that they must be safe. While people supported policies to require transparency (e.g. food labels), they assumed that the government is fulfilling its role to regulate things like antibiotic and hormone use, environmental protection, and animal welfare. We do not assume that this trust in government regulators has persisted to the present, in light of **ample evidence** that public trust in institutions has fallen.
- **The public made an ambiguous distinction between “small family farms” (SFFs) and “large industrial farms” (LIFs).** Survey data suggests that the public thinks of these two as clearly distinct, separate entities, but they haven't thought clearly about where the line is between them, tending towards a “you know it when you see it” approach (discussed further below). Small family farms are worthy of trust, are good stewards of the environment and animal welfare, and produce healthy, safe, tasty food. Large industrial farms are the opposite: untrustworthy, destructive, and producing an inferior product.

In fact, a broad view of the data suggests that when people are asked about “farms,” they picture small family farms unless otherwise specified. Responses to questions that ask only about farms are similar to those that specifically ask about small family farms, but very different from those that ask about large industrial farms.



- **The public overwhelmingly support farm subsidies, especially for small family farms and to encourage good environmental stewardship.** “By a 77% to 19% margin, Americans favor providing subsidies to farms of less than 500 acres...” while “only 31% favor and 65% oppose giving subsidies to large farming businesses.” As with other questions, when the type of farm is not specified, the public apparently imagines small farms and supports subsidies. One study tested 11 pairs of arguments for and against subsidies, and the public favored increased subsidies in every case.

The public strongly favored additional subsidies to support good environmental practices, though they simultaneously didn't see farming as a source of environmental damage. (Awareness of the environmental consequences of many farming practices has increased significantly since FrameWorks' study was published.) Advocates should see this as an opportunity: even in 2005, the public would appear to support taking subsidies away from unpopular LIFs and redirecting them towards practices seen as sustainable.

- **The public was more likely to pay a premium for sustainable farming than for humane treatment of animals:**

81% agree “I would be willing to pay more for food grown on farms using good environmental practices.” 71% agree “I would be willing to pay more for food if it meant that it could be produced in ways that protect the environment.” 60% agree “I would be willing to pay more for food produced without using chemicals.” Fewer are willing to pay more for the humane treatment of animals. A slim majority (51%) report that they are willing to spend more for humanely-produced food.

Overall, the meta-analysis paints a picture of a public that knew very little about the food system beyond the grocery store, but generally trusted that what was going on behind the scenes was acceptable. The public supported various actors in the food industry and desired to reward them with continued subsidies. There was little urgency for change, and limited imagination of what change might look like.



Section 2: Open-Ended Interviews With the Public

FrameWorks followed their meta-analysis with an initial round of qualitative investigation[1]: a series of recorded interviews with a diverse sample (n=30) using open-ended questions to draw out the mental models ordinary people used to engage with the food system. These interviews revealed the dominant frames through which Americans viewed the food system. Two frames are particularly crucial for understanding public perception of food issues circa 2005: the *consumer* frame and the *modernization* frame. We believe both of these frames continue to saturate Americans' thinking about food today.

The Consumer Frame

First and foremost, Americans conceptualize food through a *consumer* frame. This frame is based on imagery and metaphors from their "lived experience of eating, shopping, cooking, being served, and so forth," and is tied to strong values of personal choice, freedom, and autonomy. On a deeper level, this frame represents a model of *receiving* food *passively*, and generates cynicism and hopelessness about the possibility of change, which in turn creates a powerful emotional pressure to ignore problems with the food system. In fact, the consumer frame acts to conceal the existence of a food system beyond the points of sale consumers are familiar with. To emphasize the importance of this frame, the authors contrast it with Americans' understanding of the healthcare system. Americans frequently encounter news coverage of systematic problems with healthcare and are somewhat familiar with the different actors involved (such as pharmaceutical companies, insurance companies, hospitals, and government regulators). The public is used to thinking about healthcare as a system; the opposite is true of food.

Because Americans have so much direct experience with food, they are left without any feeling that there is more to know. Their experience is limited to a very short section of the supply chain from the grocery store shelves to their home, yet they spend a significant amount of their lives dealing with this small subdivision of the supply chain. Thus there is no room in their mental model for new information about other parts of the supply chain. One exchange illustrates how difficult it is for consumers to picture anything beyond the supermarket:

A: Fish? Where does it come from? Well, it comes from the ocean.

Q: Sure. But so how does it get here?

A: Oh um, I never really thought of that. I guess they fish for it.

Q: OK. Who do you picture fishing?



A: I don't know, kind of I guess just fishermen. I don't know exactly.

Q: What's the picture in your head if there is one?

A: Well when I do buy fish, I normally buy it at a Chinese market. It's like an indoor market. It's a supermarket or like a grocery store. But it's just for Chinese food... and if I'm going to buy shrimp or fish or anything I'll buy it there. Because it's fresh.

Because of this difficulty, information presented by advocates tends to be subverted into their existing model which is centered on the consumer experience. Given information about systemic issues such as food safety risks, environmental consequences of agricultural practices, etc., it is difficult for people to imagine any response other than individuals changing their choices at the point of sale. Consistent with the findings of the meta-analysis, the public places responsibility on consumers for making good choices, even if they acknowledge they themselves are not making good choices. This shows how important the values of *agency* and *autonomy* are in the consumer frame.

At the same time, on a more subconscious level, the consumer frame operates with a hierarchical model that analogizes the relationship between a provider and buyer to that between a parent and child, with the buyer passively receiving the products of the seller. This further limits the scope of action to choosing between existing products. It also creates a *nurturance* dynamic between providers (restaurants and grocery stores) and consumers, where consumers feel indebted to providers such that objecting to the practices of providers seems disloyal.

FrameWorks identifies several other beliefs which mediate between the consumer frame and inaction, including:

- *Supply and demand*: people will buy it if it is good, and therefore if people are buying it, it is good; the only appropriate way to shape the system is to “vote with your pocketbook.”
- *The decent merchant*: it is psychologically difficult to associate things we put in our bodies with bad origins. Instead of taking in compromising information, we choose to trust authority to protect our comfort.
- *The fantasy food system* created by food marketing, based on bucolic imagery as well as outright fantasy characters such as cartoon elves making cookies, further crowds out information about the real food system.

On the whole, when people aren't dismissive of the need for change, the limitations of the consumer frame render them cynical about the possibility of change. People do not have faith in other consumers to make “responsible choices,” and sometimes this leads them to feel



absolved of the responsibility to choose different products as well. Finally, the sense that change is impossible creates a strong desire to ignore the issues. That desire is reinforced by people's warm emotional attachment to their experiences of food, which they worry could be corrupted by a closer examination of the food system. This pattern of denial plays out on both a conscious and unconscious level.

The consumer frame is a veritable minefield for food system advocates of any kind. Because of its dominant role in Americans' relationship to food and its diverse manifestations, there are countless ways that advocates could accidentally trigger it. Any advocates seeking to build support for food system change must craft a narrative that does not inadvertently trigger the consumer frame and which overcomes the narrow, passive, cynical viewpoint it engenders.

The Modernization Frame

These interviews revealed that while Americans largely picture a fantasy food system putting food on grocery store shelves, they are not totally unaware that it is a fantasy. In fact, when pressed to do so, consumers can make reasonably accurate guesses about how the food system really works, based on a combination of images they've seen from advocates as well as inferences about how other modern industries work. According to the researchers, "people are essentially *making this account up as they go along* – they have no established understanding that they can easily call to mind, and instead they must scratch their heads and imagine what the "real story is, or must be." At this point, a second, equally counterproductive frame tends to come to the foreground: *modernization*.

When the modernization frame kicks in and temporarily inhibits the consumer frame, people jump from a passive, idyllic view of the food system straight to a dystopian exaggeration of reality. This caricature is so extreme that information from advocates may seem like good news by comparison. Consider these hyperbolic descriptions:

Pretty soon I don't think they'll even have to have land. I mean I guess they're probably going to be able to just do something in a laboratory or something.

When I drive by they're running the tractors and stuff. But then you don't see a huge amount of that. So I'm assuming there's a factory somewhere where they do their thing and they're running machines. I'm assuming there's a lot of automation to it these days.

[My sisters] try to do the best they can but none of that stuff that you put in the microwave was grown by farmers.



The third quote in particular highlights the observation from the meta-analysis that people don't extend the label "farmer" to large industrial farms.

Perhaps more importantly, the modernization frame fills people with a sense of *inevitability* about the changes our food system has undergone and leads them to describe critiques of that system as naïve. Modernization and industrialization are seen as superhuman forces taking a predetermined course that cannot be altered by humans. Questioning the highly industrialized food system is seen as tantamount to calling for giving up the conveniences of modern life and returning to an agrarian way of life, something interviewees roundly rejected. Instead, further modernization is seen as the only solution, whereby science would find high-tech ways to address issues.

In fact, interviews revealed an interesting nuance of the public's distinction between small family farms (SFFs) and large industrial farms (LIFs). While the public favors SFFs, most people don't see them as serious economic actors capable of feeding the nation. Instead, through the *modernization* frame, they assume that LIFs are more efficient and that they are the only way to produce enough food for the modern world.

Advocate messages which are seen as calling for a return to an older way of doing things are likely to be rejected by a majority of the public as naïve. In order to overcome the *modernization* frame, advocates should take care to describe their proposals in forward- or future-oriented language, as "the next-generation food system." These interviews suggest that while people are cautious about technologies like GMOs, there could be some role for technology to play in making advocate proposals seem progressive and optimistic, rather than reactionary or unrealistic. Advocates should also be cautious of playing into the public's exaggerated vision of mechanized food production, as this could make the truth seem less upsetting than it would be otherwise. We are left wondering whether an effective animal advocacy narrative would include a detailed description of an alternative food system (which might convince listeners that our proposal is not naïve), or whether such a description would merely confuse the public further given their lack of knowledge about the existing system.

Other Takeaways

The nature of subsidies is not understood: The interviews brought further clarity to the support for subsidies revealed in the meta-analysis. Participants did not see subsidies as a government policy that shapes what food is produced and how, but rather as a benefit program to help struggling small farmers stay in business for just one more year. If advocates wish to address subsidies, they should be sure to first explain how subsidies are an instrument the government uses to promote certain practices and discourage others, therefore making subsidies causally responsible for specific harmful trends.



Intermittent exposure is counterproductive: When issues about the food system do manage to break into the headlines, they don't stay there for long. Combined with the way the media covers these stories, this intermittent exposure leads people to see these as isolated episodes. Specifically, people assume that when the issue fades out of the news, it is because the problem has been dealt with. As one participant said: "When something seems to disappear from the news, it's usually because it's gotten better." Attempts by animal advocates to break into the news cycle with specific instances of animal cruelty may therefore be quite counterproductive, creating a narrative in the public that *while animal cruelty sometimes happens on farms, the systems in place are able to deal with these isolated incidents appropriately*. Animal welfare investigators could be seen as part of the system, creating a pattern that absolves the public of any responsibility or need for change: advocates uncover abuse, the media covers those abuses, and the government intervenes to enforce appropriate laws.

This suggests that, as far as public opinion is concerned, animal advocates may want to avoid targeting specific farms or companies with investigations uncovering specific acts of cruelty and instead focus on common practices which the industry itself admits to. Advocates should focus on strategies to create sustained media attention on systemic factors of animal agriculture, rather than creating intermittent coverage of discrete acts of cruelty.

Choosing to forget: Advocates should not underestimate the public's ability to forget, sometimes willfully, facts that they have learned about where their food comes from. The scale of the problem is completely overwhelming when viewed through the consumer frame. If there are problems with a particular product, consumers can avoid that product for a time until the problems fade from their memory. But if the problem is with the entire industry, they have nowhere else to turn. Consider these statements by interviewees:

I do trust [the food supply]. Because obviously I don't have anywhere else to buy it. Where else am I going to get it from? We know to go to the grocery store to get whatever we need. So you sort of have to trust it. You don't have a choice.

Lately I've been kind of disgusted, because PETA sent me some disgusting flyers, just gross. A whole package of stuff that I wish I hadn't looked at. But I still eat steak... now I actually think about how it got there, you know, when I'm looking at it in the grocery store before I buy it, I'm thinking what happened to it before it came ... It's been about a month since I got that, so it's fading, the memory of the pictures is fading.



... it never occurred to me until it was pointed out so blatantly. But I'll think about it rarely. It's the kind of thing I don't want to think about while I'm eating.

The researchers list a number of beliefs that work together to suppress public concern about food issues:

- government regulations and oversight (the reach of which they generally exaggerate)
- good business practices (e.g. "Businesses won't kill off their customers!")
- fellow consumers (e.g. "No one is dropping dead from pesticides.")
- media quiet (e.g. "Since we aren't hearing anything, everything must be OK.")
- personal experience (e.g. "I've never gotten sick.")

Together, these observations underline the need to offer the public a means of integrating information about the food system other than consumer change. We hypothesize that, if the public could be given an alternate course of action such as supporting a specific law or ballot initiative to make drastic changes to the food system, they would be better able to take in and organize information about the problems with the system currently.



Section 3: Analysis of Newspaper Representations

Next, FrameWorks examined the narratives used by the newspapers and by those advocating changes to the food system.[2] Unsurprisingly, in their attempts to create interesting, readable stories, journalists did little to help the public form a coherent understanding of the food system. Some of the media narratives FrameWorks documented in 2005 will be familiar to animal advocates, and several remain relevant to this day.

- **Food consumption and production are completely isolated in the media.** Articles discussing food fall into two sharply delineated categories, found in different sections and covered by different authors. This reinforces the public's disconnect between *food* and *agriculture*.
- **The media loves to pit small family farms against large industrial farms.** The media paints a highly romanticized picture of small family farms, even portraying them as economically naive, a species doomed to extinction. "Farmer" almost always means SFF, while large industrial farms are talked about infrequently and in different terms.
- **Trends are attributed fully to consumer choice.** Media rarely mentioned influential actors in the food system (lawmakers, government regulators, industry executives), instead presenting a narrative that food supply is driven solely by demand. This dynamic is celebrated as showing the power of consumers to shape the ideal food landscape.
- **Some journalists break the mold.** Researchers identified some articles which managed to draw big-picture connections between food consumption, the food system, and individual actors within it. This glimmer of hope suggests that a strong, big-picture narrative by advocates could be picked up by at least some media outlets.

While most animal advocates are already aware of the need to avoid presenting themselves as adversaries of small farmers, FrameWorks' media analysis underlines this need. SFFs are an idealized category, frequently spoken of in terms of their unique ability to embody America's history and values. The challenge for animal advocates is to present a compelling, memorable, and understandable story about the connections between food consumption, food production, and government policy. For this narrative to translate into the media, it must leave room for individual stories that reinforce, rather than undermine, a coherent picture of the whole. Most importantly, this narrative must explain the central role of actors other than consumers in shaping the food system. These findings suggest that if such a narrative were presented, at least a portion of the media would adopt it.



Section 4: Analysis of Advocacy Paradigms

FrameWorks' review of messages put out by food system advocates[3] reached a sobering conclusion: "Americans have no working conceptual model of the food system as a whole, and advocates are not helping them acquire one."

Of course, advocates consistently offer explanations of various important problems related to food – the harmful effects of pesticides, the low wages paid to agricultural workers here and abroad, the disregard of large food distribution companies for dietary health, and for the needs of people in particular neighborhoods, and so forth. But the key ideas around which advocates' thinking and communications are organized often work against, rather than for, the crystallization of a *Food System* as a coherent concept.

The authors criticized advocates for focusing on discrete issues (e.g. fair wages, environmental impact, food health, and scarcity) in a way that made it more difficult for the public to make connections between these issues, and to connect it all to their personal experience of food.

Crucially, the solution is not merely to list all these issues together. Particularly striking is the frequency with which advocates use terms that FrameWorks' interviews had shown have no meaning for the general public, such as *food security*, *sustainability*, *social justice*, and *slow, local, or organic food*. Advocates regularly made appeals to such concepts without offering any explanation of their meaning, suggesting they do not realize how little these words mean to average people.

Instead, advocates need to offer a unified conceptual model of the food system which can help the public make connections between these different issues. Such a model should use plain language and clearly define new concepts when they must be introduced.

The current research asks whether much of the vocabulary currently used by animal advocates is similarly meaningless to the general public. If so, our messages could be further obfuscating the nature of the system we are trying to target. Other reports in this series show the public does not have a shared understanding of the meaning of "cage-free" eggs. Seeing advocate materials promoting cage-free eggs or announcements about a retailer switching to cage-free eggs may serve to deepen the public's misunderstandings of animal agriculture. Likewise, advocate materials that merely name issues like *public health*, *environment*, and *workers' rights* may only sow confusion (in addition to provoking a backlash, as discussed below).



Section 5: Focus Groups

The second and more substantial phase of qualitative research involved twelve focus groups[6] in which FrameWorks explored several possible ways of reframing the food system to create a coherent, unified model. In all but the first two focus groups, participants were first asked to read one of a series of fictional news articles incorporating different framing approaches. For the most part, responses to these articles revealed the same patterns discussed in the earlier phase involving one-on-one interviews. Researchers identified several factors that would determine whether a narrative could successfully shift the conversation to more productive frames. The following are relevant for animal advocates:

- **Provide a concrete demonstration that change is possible.** Most members of the public quickly become overwhelmed when presented with the problems in the food system. However, if early on in the conversation, they are presented with a concrete example of successful change in one place and time, they become much more open to the possibility of change.
- **Appeal to *protection* and *stewardship* of resources for future generations.** People have a positive experience of the food system; they haven't experienced scarcity or hardship so they have little motivation to see change. The belief that future generations may not experience that security due to our actions now was shown to be an effective motivator for change. In later phases of the research, this evolved into the *legacy* frame.
- **Communicate the power of government to make change, and the importance of citizen action to push for government action.** Advocates must be specific about actions the government could take to support their desired goals.



Section 6: Developing a Simplifying Model

At this stage, FrameWorks developed and tested *simplifying models* to help laypeople form a coherent understanding of the food system.[4] These models had three components: a *general proposition* problematizing the food system, a *metaphor* to organize that proposition, and one or more *real-world examples* to cement the connection between the metaphor and reality.

Researchers developed roughly 40 candidate models using this template and tested them with interviews and questionnaires using 650 participants. The model ultimately recommended in the report turns out to be one of the only candidates at all relevant to animal advocates: the *runaway food system*.

In recommending this model, FrameWorks focused on several key qualities:

- It provides an image of the *system itself* (as a whole – i.e. the “meta-system” that comprises all current methods of producing and distributing food)
- It conveys the *unacceptable problems* created by the system.
- It establishes that the system *needs to be managed*.
- “The recommended model... succeeded in helping people focus on the Big Picture, acknowledge that there are real problems, and that these can and must be addressed.”

The *runaway food system* model analogizes the food system to a runaway train or truck. It begins with a core proposition that focuses on the methods of producing food rather than the experience of consumers; contains a clear causal link between an out-of-control process and harm; and implicitly calls for system-level intervention:

Our methods of producing food have become so powerful, and are so uncontrolled, that they are threatening the basic systems that are vital to our wellbeing.

This core proposition is anchored in the *runaway train* metaphor, creating a clear image of a coherent force that will cause harm and destruction if it is not brought under control. This metaphor can then support a broad range of real, specific examples from the food industry.

During this phase of research, participants were presented with the following paragraph:

Experts are increasingly concerned about what they call our Runaway Food System. The way we produce food today has radically changed, and now has the power to alter the foundations of life as we know it almost by accident. Farming chemicals like pesticides and weed-killer are permanently altering our soil and water. Genetic engineering is changing the nature of the plants and



animals we eat. And mile-long fishing nets are dragging the ocean floor and altering ecosystems. America needs to retake control of this runaway food system before it does more damage to the foundations we depend on.

Their responses bear almost no resemblance to the way people talked about food in earlier phases of qualitative research. With no further prompting, subjects called for the government to step in and bring food production under control: “Something radical needs to be done” in the form of “better regulation.”

Interestingly, while earlier phases of research concluded that talking about health was the most effective way to pique the public's interest, including health as a concern made messages in the *runaway food system* model less effective at focusing the conversation on policy. This likely speaks to the efficacy of the simplifying model for leading people to a systemic view; including health language was unnecessary to gather interest, and merely reactivated a consumer viewpoint.

Can the *runaway food system* metaphor be useful to animal advocates? The current research will certainly consider that question; we suspect the answer is yes. While the runaway metaphor is designed to connect current farming practices to future harms, it was more effective than any other model at conveying the need to manage the system. We already know that, when confronted with information about the suffering of animals, one of the most common responses from the public is helplessness, just as was the reaction to other issues studied by FrameWorks. Below, we find that most people express disgust about the conditions of animals in modern agriculture, and suggest that if they could design the food system themselves, they would create something much different. The *runaway food system* model can help the public think about food production as something that ought to be firmly under control, but has escaped that control, and can be reigned in through government interventions they otherwise would not consider.



Section 7: Testing the Model in a National Survey

Finally, FrameWorks conducted a national priming survey^[7] to quantitatively establish the efficacy of the *runaway* model. 3,294 participants were randomly assigned to answer a series of questions designed to introduce one of three frames: *legacy*, *protection*, and *reciprocity*, plus a control. Then half the respondents were randomly exposed to the *runaway food system* paragraph quoted above, for a total of 8 possible primings (including control).

After exposure, respondents were asked about their level of concern about different problems in the food system, as well as their support for various policies. Across the questions studied, the most effective priming was the *runaway food system* paragraph combined with the *legacy* frame. Interestingly, neither of these primings was very effective on its own, but together, they had a significant favorable impact across all demographics.

The *legacy* frame appealed to the value of leaving a positive legacy for future generations, or 'leaving the world better than we found it.' By focusing on the future, the *legacy* frame was key to inhibiting the negative effects of the *modernization* frame. It also promoted big-picture thinking by asking participants to imagine a time after they are gone, when their individual lived experiences as consumers would no longer be relevant. This futuristic orientation was the main difference between the *legacy* and *protection* frames and is the simplest explanation of why *legacy* outperformed.



Conclusion

Taken as a whole, FrameWorks' report highlights the importance for advocates to help the public think of the food system as a whole, an entity shaped by government and corporate policy. It also demonstrates compelling evidence that strategic reframing enables advocates to help the public build a coherent mental model of the food system. Particularly, a narrative using the *runaway food system* metaphor and emphasizing the importance of *legacy* immediately increased public understanding and support for advocates' goals. Interestingly, despite these findings, we have been unable to identify any instance of an advocacy organization adopting the explanatory metaphor of a *runaway food system*.

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