



THE FUTURE IS WHAT WE DO TOGETHER

A COVID-19
Messaging Guide

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INTRODUCTION

This COVID-19 Messaging Guide is an initiative of Australian Progress, a organisation dedicated to building the advocacy capacity of civil society. It builds upon other narrative projects on climate change, the economy, race, class, and First Nations self-determination and justice as well as recommendations from communications specialists including Anat Shenker-Osorio, Jessica Kendall, Lilian Spencer (Aus reMADE) and Common Cause Australia.

The boundaries of what is politically possible have shifted rapidly in recent months. Now more than ever, we need to move past advocacy which merely prevents the worst from happening, to a transformational story that can fundamentally change society.

To secure bold policy changes in the coming months and years, we all need more persuasive ways of talking about the issues we care about, write about and champion.

For decades, many debates have happened in our opponents' frame. But we'd been swimming in their pool so long that we lacked a language, a proper foundation, to tell our own story. This has also shifted rapidly over recent months – as the story of “we're all in this together,” the importance of government actions and frames of community, empathy and care become more dominant. **There is now potential to start having these conversations on our own turf.**

As we respond to COVID-19, we need messages that encourage people to:

- **Understand the role that governments can play** in ensuring a better life for all
- **Be ambitious in imagining a better world**, rather than seeking to return to a flawed 'normal'
- Demand better policies that **centre caring for people and the planet**
- **Respond collectively**, putting caring for one another first
- **Reject politics of division** – racism, nationalism, xenophobia, sexism, homophobia etc.

This Guide is not the final word on any of these topics of course, but a summary of the best of what we've learned so far. Different campaigns will have different communications challenges, and should adapt the recommendations and examples in this Guide to suit their own contexts.

In this moment, strong messaging is crucial because it can radically shape major reforms of the future for the better. At the same time, this is not a time for spin. Good campaign messaging requires good campaign strategy. No amount of spin will win a campaign that does not have clear objectives and clear asks.

We hope this Guide will be of use to the vast range of campaigners, experts and communications professionals working to respond to COVID-19. Together, we can move the needle of what's possible.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Deciding campaign messages should always happen in a broader strategic context. Your campaign will have unique challenges during this time. The advice provided in this Guide has been compiled as a top-level overview of messaging principles based on previous research. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to successful campaign messaging. We encourage your organisation to use this Guide as a tool when deciding specific frames and messages that will work for your campaigns.

Understand your audience's context

The people you want to communicate with do not hold a neutral, blank-slate view of your issue. They already hold an individual-level understanding of the problem based on their unique experiences, beliefs, information sources, needs and worldview.

Before you can devise messages that shift the agenda, empower supporters and neutralise opponents you must understand how your issue is currently framed.

Good questions to ask to understand how your issue is currently framed:

- What are my audiences' existing beliefs about and experiences of this issue?
- Who does my audience think is responsible? Who do they think is most affected?
- What is the dominant narrative about this issue? Has it changed due to COVID-19?
- How important do they think this is? What will broaden their vision for solutions?

When you understand how your issue is framed, you can **engage your audience in a genuine two-way conversation**, rather than:

Explaining: explaining with far too much policy detail may engage your base but is unlikely to engage new people during a global crisis.

Confronting: confronting people with highly charged rhetoric to frighten them into changing their minds or taking action is counter-productive during a crisis.

Spinning: now is not the time for spin. Communications during a crisis should be simple and truthful and reflect your campaign strategy.

As you are reading through this Guide, note that **not all messages we have included will work with all audiences**. Your messages are not for everyone. They are for the people you need to engage and convince to achieve your win.

Target audiences should be defined as part of setting campaign strategy. Campaign goals, objectives, situation analysis, execution timelines, channels and budgets all influence the audience segments you should target with your messages.

The more specific you are about your target audience, the more successful your communications will be. Rather than engaging the 'general public,' ask who your 'smallest viable audience' is.

COVID-19 is unlike any other global issue we have experienced. It affects everybody, everywhere, at different speeds and in different ways. Before communicating at all, consider what is happening for your audiences and what they need right now. If you don't have a message that is relevant to them, it is OK to stay quiet on your issue and instead support and amplify others with urgent demands.

KEY WORD SHIFT SUMMARY

Below is a brief summary of some key word shifts suggested throughout this guide.

This Guide is not the final word on any of these topics of course, but a summary of the best of what we've learned so far. Different campaigns will have different communications challenges, and should adapt the recommendations and examples in this guide to suit their own contexts. Remember that not all messages will work with all audiences.

Replace	Embrace
Recovery, go back to normal	Re-imagine, build back better, remake
Good for budget / GDP / bottom-line	Good for society, people, the planet
Consumers, customers	People, parents, mums and dads, students, voters (avoid 'Australians' or 'citizens' if talking immigration or welfare)
Investing in, spending \$X on	Growing, building, delivering, creating, making, providing [specific outcome]
Revitalise, heal, resuscitate the economy	Supercharge, get back on track, build back better, re-engineer, remake
Welfare	Income support, wage subsidy
Housing market, affordable /social housing	Homes, a house, a roof over your head
Flexible work	Unreliable, insecure work
The government has failed to do X	The government should do X (instead of Y)
Pandemic (maximises fear)	COVID-19, the virus, this crisis, this moment
You can't trust the government	The government should do X to earn our trust
Tax, taxpayer money, taxation	Public funds, contributions, corporations paying what they're supposed to, their fair share. Building schools and hospitals

MESSAGING PRINCIPLES FOR THIS MOMENT

Drawing on a number of messaging studies and guides from Australian Progress, ASO Communications and other communications specialists, we have compiled a list of 8 messaging principles that should always be used, and are crucial when communicating over the coming months.

NAME THE GOOD: LEAD WITH VISION & VALUES

Right now, most progressive messaging follows a familiar order: lead with problems, move to solution, end with a call to action. But people already have 99 problems and they don't want yours. The desire to sound the alarm about the egregious, systematic and growing harms to our communities is understandable. But that doesn't make it compelling. The problem with problems is that people don't want more of them.

Instead of leading off with problems, **narratives that first link to shared vision and/or values have demonstrated to be more effective at shifting opinions toward progressive policy solutions.**

Marriage equality won out precisely because LGBTIAQ+ people made the debate about values of commitment and family. When they stopped talking "rights" and started talking "love," the tide turned.

Family, community and fairness are all values that tested strongly in message testing in the US, and are all beginning to be more widely used in the narrative post-COVID-19. We need to begin leading our messaging with these values.

Your values or vision also must be communicated in a simple, clear and coherent way.

After leading with vision, move on to:

Highlight the barrier – what is stopping this vision happening, try explicitly explain the choice a decision maker is making to cause the barrier. Leading with vision & values doesn't mean you don't talk about the problem. Naming and diagnosing the problem gives you credibility. Having an economic and justice narrative for every campaign issue will be more important than ever before.

Promote the solution/action – finish by pivoting into the solutions or actions you need to overcome the barrier to reach the vision.

Replace	Vision
<p>There's a war on casual and migrant workers who are being excluded from JobKeeper payments.</p>	<p>Vision: Every person deserves to be able to put food on the table and a roof over their head.</p> <p>Barrier: But right now Scott Morrison is picking and choosing who can do that and who can't by excluding casual and migrant workers from JobKeeper payments.</p> <p>Solution: The government should expand JobKeeper payments to include everyone.</p>

DESCRIBE WHAT YOU SEEK, NOT WHAT YOU OPPOSE

Martin Luther King Jr's speech was called 'I have a Dream', not 'I have a Complaint'. Human beings have a negative bias, and the world can seem like it's going to hell – especially during a pandemic. When we communicate to our supporter base, we often talk about 'All the Things' that are wrong and how powerful our opponents are.

As well as not focussing on values, as mentioned on the previous page, this also means **we often spend very little time talking about alternatives, solutions and the power of coming together to achieve them.** We then invite people to join our tribe of depressed know-it-alls and wonder why so few seem enthusiastic.

It's our job to show people how a better world can be achieved. Try emphasise the solution twice as often as the problem.

Our Message, Problem Focus	Our Message, Solution Focus
<p>Income inequality is now at its worst levels in over a generation.</p> <p>The pandemic is widening the gap between the top and bottom income earners. In terms of average income, somebody in the top 20% has around five times as much income as somebody in the bottom 20% income group.</p> <p>We need a whole-of-society approach to tackling inequality, before it further harms our economy and communities.</p>	<p>Everyone in our society should have a fair go.</p> <p>But our economy is not delivering for many people. Huge corporations have too much power. Right now some private corporations are trying to get public money to continue making profits and paying their CEOs huge salaries.</p> <p>We need good governments that look after all of us, not just a powerful few. During this crisis, it is so important that our governments stand up for us, not just focussing on looking after powerful corporations who are lobbying them for a bailout.</p>

AVOID NEGATION

A crucial principle to remember when alongside describing what you seek, not what you oppose, is to avoid negation.

Do not myth-bust.
What we fight, we feed.

What not to say:

- ‘It is now clear that it is wrong to accuse people receiving Newstart of being dole bludgers.’
- ‘It is not true that homeless people are drug or alcohol-addicted.’
- ‘The need to panic buy toilet paper is a myth.’
- ‘Protecting the environment doesn’t have to hurt the economy.’

The problem with these statements is that they rely solely on referencing the opponents’ existing concept, which already has a foothold in our audience’s minds, so often ends up being what the audience hears and remembers.

That’s why **‘myth-busting’ usually doesn’t work for the people we’re really aiming for; it often ends up reinforcing the original myth. As George Lakoff says, ‘facts bounce off frames’.**

Telling people that our opponents are wrong is no longer enough and distracts from transformative change we want. In fact, it often just gives a free megaphone by repeating their messages.

We’re better off reframing the debate entirely than exclusively arguing in an old one.

Some COVID-19 specific examples include:

Instead of saying: ‘It is now clear that it is wrong to accuse people receiving Newstart of being dole bludgers.’

We can say: ‘This crisis shows that we are all human, and we never know what the future will throw our way. The JobSeeker and JobKeeper packages have supported millions of people to get through this crisis and it’s clear that support needs to continue so that we are prepared for the future.’

Instead of saying: ‘It is not true that homeless people are drug or alcohol-addicted.’

We can say: ‘During this crisis we all need to stay home to protect each other, but to do that we need to make sure everyone has a roof over their head no matter what. Everyone deserves a home.’

Instead of saying: ‘Protecting the environment doesn’t have to hurt the economy’

We can say: ‘We can supercharge our economy and create jobs by funding large environment protection projects including investing in clean renewable energy and First Nations-led land management.’

TALK ABOUT PEOPLE, NOT DOLLARS & CENTS

Based on our Economic Messaging research, it is likely that **focussing on money and costs can turn a persuadable audience away from our proposals**. It reduces the human outcome to a dollar value, and re-frames from whether an outcome is worthwhile to whether we can ‘afford’ it.

We **must still launch bold economic justice campaigns**, but instead of focussing on the costs, if we instead talk about impacts on actual people, or the places they live and love, our audiences then focus on the outcomes and a better life – which they value far more than money. People like the idea of the government doing things for everyone, and they like the upside of their lives improving more than they worry about where the ‘money comes from.’

We also tend to shield humans from view, calling them “beneficiaries,” “enrollees,” “eligible individuals,” “applicants,” or “citizens.” These are labels our audiences don’t apply to themselves or anyone they love. This applies even to the common term “worker,” which has proven in numerous tests to fall flat and diminish interest in policies like paid sick days and paid leave time. “Working people” is not only much stronger, it actually beats “middle class” as an effective label.

People see money mostly as a means to an end. **When asked to talk about the things they care about they don’t bring up money or the economy – and neither should we.** Stress outcomes for people, NOT dollar output. Avoid ‘spend,’ ‘invest,’ ‘borrow,’ ‘afford’ or any kind of money talk. Likewise, when talking about economic policies, **we should talk in terms of government activity and its outcomes, not the financing of government activities.**

Our Message, Their Frame	Our Message, Our Frame
‘The cost of not acting on climate change actually outweighs the cost of taking action.’ Or ‘Polluters should pay.’	‘We can enjoy our lives in harmony with our planet and with plenty of energy if we get our energy from clean sources like the sun and wind.’

Note: While our messaging should focus on the impact of economic decisions on people and the places they love, this doesn’t mean we should reduce the rigorous economic modelling, and policy backing for our proposals. While we need messages that can persuade audiences, **we also need credibility at the table with decision-makers**, particularly during a time where opposition forces will be making their own bold efforts to structure an economy that benefits them.

Specifically mentioning people is also crucial when framing the problem – **wherever possible, describe who is behind the problems you catalogue.** Call them out by name, point specifically at corporations, CEOs and the greedy few who are taking away from working people, rather than highlighting vague, broad systemic inequalities. And, when this isn't obvious, use verbs like choose or decide, eliminate or confiscate, to characterize what lawmakers have done or seek to do.

Always highlight that people (and corporations) do things, avoid passive language. Only a human-made problem can be human-solved. When we describe problems leaving out who's responsible, why things are the way they are, we reinforce a sense of inevitability and powerlessness to actually change them. **Passive language is bad story-telling.**

In focus groups and dial tests during the Economic Messaging project, people, including our support base, **recoiled from generalisations and labels like 'tax cheats,' 'greedy CEOs,' or 'bullies.'**

However, when we **describe specific corporate bad behaviour** – such as 'haven't paid the tax they are supposed to' or 'use government bailouts to pay their CEO more' – those actions speak for themselves. People who hear about those actions are more likely to agree with proposals to reduce corporate power or increase government regulation and services.

Passive Language & Generalisations	Active Language & Specificity
Unemployment rates have increased to record-levels since the pandemic started.	Some corporations are still paying huge salaries to their CEOs while firing employees who help create these profits.

Lastly, mentioning money will always encourage the question of “but how do we pay for this?”

If asked this, remember that this crisis has shown us that **budgets are about choices based on values and priorities, rather than cold hard constraints or immutable laws.** Within a very short-timeframe we decided to give people free childcare when that would have been 'unaffordable' just months ago. We decided to double Newstart, when that has been ruled out for years (and a full doubling never even dreamed of from civil society) based on budget arguments. This happened because we decided it mattered.

We have been sold a lie that it's people and planet OR a strong economy. We can have both. Now it is up to us to push for decisions that put the economy to work for us, and keep showing our government what kinds of choices we expect from them.

TALK CAKE, NOT RECIPE

This is probably the biggest shift for progressive communicators. We're comfortable exposing the failures of the other side. We're comfortable pointing out all the ways they're wrong, but this only frustrates their policies – their vision of the world – it doesn't realise ours.

There are better ways to engage and convince persuadable audiences.

Instead of trying to educate people about the process to get something, show them what they get.

We tend to label our desired solutions in terms of policy, not outcomes. For example, we demand a “minimum wage increase” instead of “people are paid enough to make ends meet.”

Instead, **show people the outcome** – for example, “Every child should be able to go to preschool for free, to be nurtured, loved and taught,” not, “We need a bigger investment in early childhood education.”

People believe in the concepts of collectivism. People value strong communities, caring about each other, caring for our planet and providing for the common good. They want active, empowered government because they believe it does a better job of taking into account the needs of everyone in society. People even believe in sharing the wealth, and time and again say they'd willingly pay more tax if it led to better services and outcomes for everyone.

Do not communicate in their frames. Instead, let our opposition argue why we can't have better healthcare, a faster commute home to our families or protect our Great Barrier Reef.

This is particularly relevant for public communications. In certain contexts, such as a detailed policy briefing with a politician or their staff, walking through the recipe may be required.

Lastly, if your cake isn't relevant to your audiences right now, it is OK not to communicate at all. Don't risk appearing opportunistic by poorly timing your message. People reject messages they feel are insensitive or appear self-interested. Consider how you can support other urgent campaigns, either through amplifying other voices or even seconding capacity to other groups rapidly responding to COVID-19.

CREATE SOME GOOD, DON'T JUST REDUCE SOMETHING BAD

When framing your solution or policy objectives, we tend to employ the language of “fixing” or “reforming,” “improving” or “mitigating” – especially during a ‘recovery’ phase after a pandemic. **Amelioration of harm, or describing a policy as reducing some recognised bad thing, may feel accurate but it suppresses motivation and long-term engagement.**

Instead, **describing the thing your campaign aims to create helps sustain the will to fight among your base and engender interest among sceptics.** We must be for something desirable rather than merely against something deplorable. Calling out a corporate bailout as bad doesn’t work unless we have some attractive, fleshed out alternative to name in its place. This is another reason to lead with vision or values: leadership does not sound to persuadable audiences like complaining all the time.

INVOKE ANGER OR COMPASSION, NOT FEAR

This is a period of significant fear. We should not ignore that those fears exist, and acknowledging our audiences’ fears can help establish trust.

However it is not our role to increase levels fear. You don’t have to invoke fear during a global crisis – in fact doing so may do more harm to your cause than good. **Fear and security-based arguments make people want to retreat behind big walls and look after their own;** they put us in a more negative and individualistic mindset and build support for more authoritarianism.

Decades of testing demonstrate that fear evokes a fight or freeze response, with the latter the far more common response. The antidote to fear is not despondency or self-isolation, not anger or blame. **The antidote to fear is either anger or compassion.** In order to inspire people to demand more and better we must move away from creating more fear, and instead create spaces for people to either display care for one another or channel their anger at the choices those with power are making during COVID-19.

Our message should also be rooted in the values of interdependence, mutual solidarity, shared purpose and collective action. Because when we are all in for all of us, we can create the world each and every one of us needs to thrive.

DISCUSS RACE AND CLASS OVERTLY

The Race-Class Narrative Analysis project conducted by ASO Communications in the US found that the ‘base’, which includes many people of colour, is deeply concerned about racism. Failing to address racial concerns or merely tacking them onto economic ones leaves our base feeling unheard and unmotivated to engage with us, let alone fired up to reach out to others.

Most persuadables, among them many whites, feel deep concern about race. The notion that we must avoid race with the middle is wrong: remaining silent on this helps our opposition’s toxic worldview gain primacy. Instead **we must frame racism as a tool used to divide and thus harm all of us.**

During the pandemic, conservative already attempting to turn Chinese citizens and migrants into a scapegoat for the crisis, leading to increased racism targeting Asian Australians. This is an intentional tactic in an attempt to diminish the social solidarity and support for collective action that are the foundation of a progressive agenda. Pointing out this strategic racism and tying it to the class war that wealthy reactionaries are winning helps connect the experiences of targeted people of colour and the experiences of economically anxious white people. It provides a way for people of all races to understand our noxious racial environment and makes clear that white people will gain more from cross-racial solidarity than from siding with billionaires.

Making division the central problem seeds desire for unity as the response.

When calling out opponents for intentional division, we must **provide frequent endorsements for coming together**, and refer to doing so successfully in the past.

This research was conducted in the United States, a factor that should be considered when adapting for your own local context.

Instead of this	Say this	Notes
Our opponents are racist against Chinese migrants, Asian Australians and people of colour	Our opponents are pointing the finger at Chinese migrants, Asian Australians and people of colour during the pandemic	Tying scapegoating to economic concerns allows audiences, including whites, to see that their well-being is tied to rejecting racial resentment.
Pit our communities against each other	Divide us against each other	“Pit against” implies the audience is complicit in the continued antagonism.
United we stand, divided we fall	No matter our differences, most of us want pretty similar things	Claiming universality can feel disingenuous in a narrative about division. Focusing on common desires sets a strong foundation for why intentional division is wrong.

USE METAPHORS

Metaphors are one of the most powerful messaging tools, but they can either help or hinder your narrative. Studies have found that “even the subtlest instantiation of a metaphor (via a single word) can have a powerful influence over how people attempt to solve social problems“ (Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2011)

Because of the power metaphors have, **we need to question every image and word we use.** Slipping into our opponent’s metaphors can reinforce their worldview, but adjusting our messages to use our own powerful metaphors can have a significant influence.

An example that shows this power is a study on the framing of crime shown below. The same message has only one key word changed, to alter the metaphorical meaning.

Crime is a beast ravaging the city of Addison. Five years ago Addison was in good shape, with no obvious vulnerabilities. Unfortunately, in the past five years the city’s defense systems have weakened, and the city has succumbed to crime.

Today, there are more than 55,000 criminal incidents a year - up by more than 10,000 per year. There is a worry that if the city does not regain its strength soon, even more serious problems may start to develop.

vs

Crime is a virus ravaging the city of Addison. Five years ago Addison was in good shape, with no obvious vulnerabilities. Unfortunately, in the past five years the city’s defense systems have weakened, and the city has succumbed to crime.

Today, there are more than 55,000 criminal incidents a year - up by more than 10,000 per year. There is a worry that if the city does not regain its strength soon, even more serious problems may start to develop.

When presented as a beast, marauding around the streets, people are more likely to recommend locking people up and increasing police numbers.

When presented as a virus to be treated or eradicated, people are more likely to recommend social reform, like investing in community initiatives etc.

When using metaphors, find simple ones that fit well and are appropriate for the scale of the crisis we are in. The goal is to be clear not too clever.

“ Analyses of language reveal the extraordinary fact that **we use around one metaphor for every ten seconds of speech or written work.** If that sounds like too much, it’s because you’re so used to thinking metaphorically – to speaking of ideas that are ‘conceived’ or rain that is ‘driving’ or rage that is ‘burning’ or people who are ‘dicks’. Our models are not only haunted by ourselves but by properties of other things.

– Will Storr, *The Science of Storytelling*

COVID-19 METAPHORS & FRAMES TO USE

Building upon the above advice, this section outlines a number of recommended metaphors and framing shifts, including some examples. There is no cookie-cutter solution to complex messaging, so please adapt for your own campaign context.

GOVERNMENT AS THE SOLUTION, NOT THE PROBLEM

When most people hear criticism of ‘the government’ or even politicians, they understand it as ‘our system of democratic government isn’t working.’ People don’t readily distinguish between this Government (i.e. the Morrison Government) and the government. So **when we focus on the failures of a particular Government, we undermine our case for a government that can address our needs, and instead reinforce the article of neoliberal faith that ‘business’ provides a better solution.**

They are left to conclude that private corporations are the viable option for getting something done. When we point out the shortcomings of political leadership, **focusing on what governments should do conveys what they have done wrong, in a way that encourages people to think good government can do right.**

When we tell the story this way, **people prefer ‘competent and caring government’** to solve their problems over the ‘efficient, choice-rich and cheap’ private sector.

When criticising a government policy, program or project, or lack thereof, **say ‘government can/should do x,’ not ‘government has failed or sold-out by doing y.’** If you need to criticise a program or lack of a program, say ‘government can do better by doing x’, don’t convey that the government can’t solve our problems.

Our Message, Their Frame	Our Message, Our Frame
<p>By excluding casuals from the JobKeeper package, the government has failed to provide for some of the most vulnerable in our society.</p>	<p>The private sector has pushed a million people onto casual contracts, leaving them in precarious jobs. The government should expand JobKeeper to make sure everyone in our society is taken care of.</p>
<p>You cannot trust the government with your data. They won’t share the source code to the CovidSafe app, and have not been transparent about it.</p>	<p>The CovidSafe app uses Amazon data servers – one of the world’s largest tech giants with a track record of data security breaches. We need the government to be fully transparent about the CovidSafe app and to share the source code with the public.</p>
<p>By not putting a freeze on rent increases, the government is forcing people to either accumulate huge amounts of debt pushing them out on the street.</p>	<p>For years, property developers have driven up rent to unsustainable levels. During the pandemic, landlords can access mortgage relief but many renters have little support. The government should make sure everyone has a home by offering rent relief & a freeze on any rent increases.</p>

REIMAGINING, NOT RECOVERING 'BACK TO NORMAL'

Many messengers are already talking about what society will look like “when it goes back to normal.” Frames that back this up include “snap-back” and even the concept of “recovery.”

These frames imply we want to return to how things were. But we do not want to simply ‘recover’ from this crisis and return to normal – that ‘normal’ was full of injustice and inequality. Our goal should not be returning to the ‘normal’ system that caused this crisis. That exact system is also fueling the climate crisis and rising inequality and is something civil society has been urging to change.

Our words matter, and if we use frames that push for a return to normal, it becomes more likely that we will move back to a broken world of injustice.

Some audiences may be craving ‘normal’, so it is important to **take people on a journey to understanding the better future you are seeking** – talk cake, not recipe and lead with visions & values to help take them there.

While the use of the word ‘recovery’ may be difficult to avoid given it is already a key word in the lexicon for this moment, we should where possible avoid framing this as a return to the past system and instead **merge bold, ambitious visions for the future with powerful metaphors – journeys that will take us there, and reimagining, not just recovering.**

Instead, in the words of Arundhati Roy, **we should treat [“the pandemic as a portal.”](#)**



We will not go back to normal.

Normal never was.

Our pre-corona existence was not normal other than we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding hate and lack.

We should not long to return, my friends.

We are being given the opportunity to **stitch a new garment.** One that fits all of humanity and nature.

– **Sonya Renee Taylor**

A JOURNEY, NOT A WAR

The pandemic is certainly a test of our communities, of our humanity, of our capacity to care for one another and of our government’s ability to look after all of us. But it is not a war. It does not pit nations against nations. People responding to it are not soldiers, ready to give their lives for their country.

Furthermore, **when we frame it as a war, we create space for draconian and anti-democratic government responses.** It sparks thoughts of individualism, and protecting yourself first and foremost. **It calls for a crack down on freedoms, civil liberties and protest.** Finally, war metaphors have undertones of nationalism – pitting countries against countries rather than calling for global cooperation.

Instead we should use metaphors of a journey – one that requires careful navigation to get us to a destination that is in sight (a better society). That journey may have challenges, obstacles and hurdles but if we come together we can get through this. The real question isn’t about where we will get, but how. While journeys can be difficult and painful along the way, they are full of hope – which is exactly what people need to know that change is possible.

Our Message, Their Frame	Our Message, Our Frame
<p>“Together we will fight this virus”</p> <p>“Frontline staff” “Frontline communities”</p> <p>“Health worker heroes”</p> <p>“The battle against COVID-19”</p>	<p>“We can navigate our way through and out of this.”</p> <p>“What is the world we want to come out of this into?”</p> <p>Use movement, change – “Slow the spread”, “Flatten the curve”</p>

COVID-19 METAPHORS & FRAMES TO AVOID

AVOID OPPOSITION METAPHORS: WAR, CRIME, PATIENT ECONOMY

Already we are seeing a number of metaphors being used by our oppositions – **it is crucial that we avoid these, and be intentional about the metaphors we are promoting.**

Metaphors to avoid	Instead use
<p>War metaphor – creates space for anti-democratic government responses, justifies conflict between countries, promotes individual response.</p> <p>“We must fight coronavirus before it invades Australia and threatens frontline communities.”</p>	<p>Journey metaphor – may have challenges but has hope that with careful navigation you can reach a sought after destination.</p> <p>“We can navigate our way through and out of this.”</p> <p>or House renovation project – If a storm tears up your house you try to keep the bits you like, repair what needs to be fixed but also build something better by avoiding old problems that were there before. (Re-build together is similar).</p> <p>“Together, we can build back better.”</p>
<p>Economy as a patient – Frames the economy as an entity that can simply be healed and sent back out.</p> <p>“Revitalise the economy, economic rescue package, we need a stimulus, the economy is on life support, resuscitation.”</p>	<p>Economy as a machine or vehicle, something human-made: Frames economy as an engine that needs to be driven, that is not its own entity but rather something in the government’s control, taking us on a journey. Human created, needs a driver, can be improved/reimagined.</p> <p>“Get the economy back on track. Supercharge the economy. Flick of a switch. Steering us towards a better future.”</p>
<p>Crime metaphor – “lockdown”, “curfew” and “strict measures” implies we have all done something wrong, and need to be punished.</p>	<p>Care metaphor – “Right now we need to stay home so that we can look after each other by flattening the curve” implies we are all doing the right thing, and that compassion and community are the answer, not a policing and breeches of civil liberties.</p>

WHEN TALKING ABOUT A MARGINALISED GROUP, ALWAYS HIGHLIGHT THE CAUSE

The pandemic is exacerbating existing inequalities, yet many voices who are feeling the direct impacts most are still missing from the COVID-19 discussion.

Communities of colour, First Nations communities, incarcerated communities, people with disability and low income communities are disproportionately affected because this crisis is another crisis on top of existing inequalities. We need to uplift voices of disproportionately affected communities and centre language around empowerment and justice.

While centering the voices of marginalised groups is crucial in and of itself, **we need to make sure to always highlight cause & effect**, otherwise disadvantage without cause frames the group as being inherently deficient. **If we don't spell out who created disadvantage, audiences assume it must be due to the groups' own failings.**

Specifically this means **always make it clear what decisions have caused the disadvantage, and who specifically caused that to happen.** An example of this can be found in a recent open letter supporting calls from First Nations groups for an urgent COVID-19 response in remote communities:

“The high rates of chronic illness and disease in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities only tell half the story. Some of the most influential determinants of health are access to adequate healthcare and housing, and these have been chronically underfunded.

Successive Australian governments have failed to meet national targets that would save lives, and have left Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people extremely vulnerable to the coronavirus crisis.”

It also **means highlighting solutions, not just problems**, as mentioned earlier. Showing that the group may currently be experiencing disadvantage, but that does not have to be the case. The same open letter showcases this:

“Right across the country, it is Aboriginal community leaders, councils and organisations that are the first responders to this crisis for their communities.

They know what solutions are needed and are informing governments across the country on how to best respond to the needs of one of the most at-risk populations to coronavirus.

The Government must work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, respond to the requests of community-controlled organisations on the ground and immediately release critical resourcing needed to keep people safe.”

One of the best things well-resourced organisations can do to inform messaging during this crisis is to **engage in deep listening** with communities most affected and develop campaign plans that reflect what they most need.

AVOID ‘THE VIRUS DOESN’T DISCRIMINATE’

It does. This pandemic and the economic crises it causes will not impact everyone equally – it will exacerbate existing inequalities, impacting some communities far more than others. Using messaging such as ‘the virus doesn’t discriminate, so neither should we’ to argue that communities must not be left out of government economic support packages or other policies does more harm than good. **We should not just passively avoid ‘the virus doesn’t discriminate’ frames, we must actively refute them.**

We are all weathering the same storm, but we are definitely not all in the same boat.

AVOID HIGHLIGHTING INDIVIDUALISM

When audiences perceive a lack of resources it will naturally prime individualism. Understand that it will happen and it’s normal. It is appropriate to acknowledge this fear, but not to promote it – instead our role is to promote the benefits of collectivism.

We need to highlight and promote solidarity and community, not selfishness and individualism. The below Replace & Embrace table comes from messaging work by the New Economy Organisers Network (NEON).

Replace	Embrace
Image & stories of people selfishly hoarding food and panic buying	People are worried about getting enough food for the coming weeks, but most of us are buying what we need and sharing what we have with our neighbours who need it.
“Protect yourself and fight the virus by washing your hands and social distancing. It is not safe or responsible to leave your home at this time.”	“When we wash our hands and keep our distance, we protect everyone in our community. Let’s come together by staying apart.” (Credit: Frameworks)

REFERENCES

This Guide is a compilation of messaging and narrative advice, studies and guides from the Australian Progress community. It draws upon work from our team, our Global Messaging Fellows and key narrative specialists we work with regularly, particularly Anat Shenker-Osorio, Jessica Kendall, Lillian Spencer (Aus reMADE) and Common Cause Australia.

Finally, it draws upon recent COVID-19 messaging briefings from our Global Advanced Messaging and Narrative Programme partners, NEON.

Specific guides and studies it draws upon, that include far more detail, include:

- [Economic Messaging Guide](#) & [Cheat Sheet](#), Australian Progress & Lillian Spencer
- [Words that Work: Making the best case for people seeking asylum](#), ASRC
- [National COVID-19 Messaging Guide](#), ASO Communications
- [Messaging this Moment](#), ASO Communications & Centre for Community Change
- [Race-Class: A Winning Electoral Narrative](#), ASO Communications
- [Pandemic Response Guide](#), Public Interest Research Centre (PIRC)
- [Metaphors We Think With: The Role of Metaphor in Reasoning](#), Paul H. Thibodeau & Lera Boroditsky, 2011

“ **Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew.**

This one is no different. **It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.**

We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us.

Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, **ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.”**

– **Arundhati Roy**