



## **The Food Narrative Project: Toward a More Informed Conversation about Food and Farming**

### ***The Problem***

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The national conversation about how to build a sustainable food and farming system that feeds everyone can quickly become polarized and unproductive. It suffers from two impediments that stand in the way of a more informed and useful engagement.

The first impediment is a high rate of agricultural illiteracy. Most Americans know so little about how food is raised, they are ill equipped to understand different farming practices and policies or make food choices that serve their own best interest, let alone that of a sustainable food system. They don't see the positive contributions that farms can make toward land stewardship and the production of safe, healthy fresh foods. They read and hear about the negatives, such as pollution and soil erosion, and assume that represents the whole story. Most Americans live *a thousand mental miles* from where their food comes from.

The second impediment we call *polarized simplicity*. The public conversation about food and farming has turned into a debate in which complicated science and sophisticated growing practices are reduced to oversimplified versions of good versus bad, either/or, all or nothing. At a time when technology is measuring, managing, and communicating more complexity and nuance than ever before, nuance is missing from the public conversation about what kinds of agriculture and foods are best for society.

'Changing the conversation' is a vital part of changing structures and systems. Our goal is to develop a simple narrative that advances public understanding and is sufficiently compelling to enable recruitment of people and organizations who want to use the results in their own work and communities.

### ***The Opportunity***

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There is an opportunity to reframe the food and farm narrative so that it broadens the national public conversation and diversifies the field of players who collaborate to do the necessary hard work. People are paying attention to food like never before. Interest among citizens in healthy eating, buying local, and organic and ecologically-grown foods is strong and growing. Thousands of organizations are involved, and they have the capacity to spread new frames and messages that can slowly shift public understanding.

A reframed narrative would be hopeful but not fantastical. It would align with the realistic-hopeful future of U.S. agriculture. It would not serve as greenwashing—public relations cover for farms and companies that are part of the problem more than the solution. And it would strive to be a North Star for a sustainable food system

(i) that provides healthy, safe, affordable food for all citizens, (ii) improves its soils and protects its natural resources, and (iii) enables profitable farms, small, medium, and large.

### ***The Approach***

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Rewriting the food narrative is not simply about getting the facts right or coming up with catchy phrases. For example, scientists and advocates for IPM have been trying to explain it to the public for fifty years, with only limited success. If we are to increase the public's engagement around food and farming, we must start with a more sophisticated knowledge of effective communications, including framing—*frames are the mental models we all use to make sense of the world*. Communicators should know more about the science behind how people form their worldviews and day-to-day opinions.

To arrive at a sound, durable, and high-level framing strategy that can guide lots of organizations pursuing systems-level change on multiple aspects of good farming practices, the Food Narrative Project is relying on Strategic Frame Analysis®, an approach to reframing social issues pioneered by the FrameWorks Institute of Washington, D.C. This proven process of collaboration between physical scientists and communications scientists has developed and amplified better science narratives about issues ranging from early brain development to climate change. We are following the contours of this proven process to develop a new narrative about food and farming. This evidence-based, proven approach involves three stages of work:

- *I. Map the terrain.* First, through interviews, report on what experts believe needs to be communicated. Then, determine what ordinary citizens believe about the same subject matter. Also, consider how advocates of good farming practices are currently communicating to the public. Next, compare how the durable patterns of thinking that shape American public opinion compare with the expert consensus.
- *II. Reframing--develop a framing strategy that can navigate to new terrain.* Responding to the gap between the expert and citizen points-of-view, we develop reframing hypotheses, then test those hypotheses systematically, and then develop recommendations based on the resulting evidence.
- *III. Outreach--make the reframing strategy transparent, applicable, and useful to the field.* FrameWorks translates the findings and recommendations into formats that advocates can readily use. Then, they train, equip, and support the field so it can ably disseminate the results of the project.

### ***Timeline and Structure***

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The Food Narrative Project is a five-year endeavor, currently in the middle of Year Two. It is co-sponsored by three organizations: **IPM Voice**, a national advocacy organization whose mission is to make IPM intelligible and valuable to the public; **FrameWorks Institute**, an independent research organization comprised of Ph.D. level social scientists whose primary work is to translate the views of scientists to the public; and **Red Tomato**, a nonprofit food hub marketing the fresh fruits and vegetables of fifty Northeast farms to supermarkets.

The Project is run by its Core Team, a diverse mix of agro scientists, social scientists, and food and farm practitioners. The Core Team is developing a cohort of Communication Partners with high level interest in the work and outcomes of the Project. This group will grow steadily in number in the coming years, and will be key to the dissemination of results. For more information, contact Michael Rozyne of Red Tomato, [mrozyne@redtomato.org](mailto:mrozyne@redtomato.org), 781-363-0090.