

EDITOR'S NOTE



By Sean Gibbons

In this age, in this country, public sentiment is everything. With it, nothing can fail; against it, nothing can succeed. Whoever molds public sentiment goes deeper than he who enacts statutes, or pronounces judicial decisions.

Abraham Lincoln

Like many of Honest Abe's maxims, those words ring true today. Consider a statement you've probably heard lately, and maybe even felt:

"The system is rigged."

It's an idea that resonates for a reason. A recent study from the Pew Research Center revealed nearly 8 in 10 Americans *do not* trust government. Or banks. Or big business. Or many of the other institutions that underpin our society.

As George Packer, staff writer at *The New Yorker* and National Book Award-winning author of *The Unwinding* observes, Americans are losing faith in the "social contract" that underwrote all American institutions.

That's the bad news. But there's reason to be optimistic.

Why? A new bipartisan survey of voters released by Independent Sector found that 74% of Americans trust the social sector to bring positive change to their communities and the country.

It gets better. The same survey found 85% of Americans of every political stripe want to hear *more* from foundations and nonprofit organizations.

That's astounding, and has profound implications for the social sector and the work we do.

And that's just the half of it.

As trust in many institutions declines, America's appetite for information is growing. According to Nielsen, the average

American adult now consumes 10 hours and 39 minutes of information and media each day. That's *up* one full hour from just last year.¹

There is a name for this phenomenon: the Information Age.

Each of the 38,340 seconds the average adult now spends each day reading, listening, watching, and sharing represents a unique chance for the ideas and issues we champion to be seen, heard, understood, adopted, and activated.

How can we capitalize on this?

Fascinating new research commissioned by the Ford Foundation gives some insight: Breaking through to make good ideas resonate in the national conversation requires talking to people, not at them.

And that means *using your voice*. Effectively. With smart strategies and precision. Informed by research and driven by data. And let's be clear: smart, strategic communications is not about activity—it's about creating impact and making a difference. After all, this work comes with a moral imperative: Strategic communications can and should change the world and improve lives.

In this fourth issue of *Change Agent*, we're proud to present a range of voices across academia and our sector

1. nielsen.com/us/en/insights/reports/2016/the-total-audience-report-q1-2016.html

DIGITAL SPOTLIGHT

Watch an Extended Interview

Sean speaks about *Change Agent*, the role of design in producing change, and the future of communications in the social sector.

changeagent.comnetwork.org/editors-note →



who illuminate strategies, ideas, and tools you can use to elevate and advance the issues and ideas your organization holds dear into the new American media diet.

We've included case studies that illustrate smart communications fostering change, improving lives, and creating impact. Surfrider CEO Chad Nelsen and Communications Chief Nancy Eiring unpack the communications plan that mobilized a grassroots effort to save a treasured stretch of California coastline, and Natural Resources Defense Council walks you through how it translated a wonky data project into a stunning communications and public policy success story.

In this new age of information, Americans want to hear more from those in the business of doing good.

You'll learn how to harness pop culture to shift narratives. The Atlantic Philanthropies reflects on its plans to maintain influence after it closes its doors this winter. Kaiser Family Foundation details how it developed Kaiser Health News, one of the go-to resources for health news in the country.

As part of our ongoing partnership with *Harvard Business Review*, we'll look at new research from Wharton and Northwestern University professors that reveals the limits of empathy.

Nonprofit Marketing Guide's Kivi Leroux Miller explains why it's crucial to invest in and "level up" communications skills and expertise across the sector. Public Interest Registry CEO Brian Cute shares what an effective digital footprint looks like, and how your online identity affects trust.

There's also a piece to ponder. Dr. Atul Gawande, a contributor to *The New Yorker* and renowned physician, reflects about death and dying in America in an interview with Network member Steven Birenbaum of the California Health Care Foundation.

This issue of *Change Agent* would not have been possible without the incredible support of The Rockefeller Foundation, whose investments in communicating about urban life by underwriting *The Guardian* newspaper's coverage of the "century of the city" are explained here.

I'd also like to thank the Board of The Communications Network for their continued support and commitment. The incredible team at Constructive, who showed extraordinary innovation, creativity, and artistry in designing this issue, deserves thanks from all of us. Through their work, we'll have a new interactive, online version of this issue of *Change Agent* that delves even further into the content of our articles to show you data, resources, and more. It's our hope that this transmedia approach will inspire you to explore new possibilities in your own communications work.

As the adage goes, "You are what you eat." Given the fact we're now consuming an astonishing 10 hours and 39 minutes of information each day, it's clear that Americans are hungry for ideas and hungry for leadership. It's time for foundations and nonprofits to step forward and embrace being change agents. And not just through your good works.

Use your voice. Use your relationships. Use your reputation. Use your influence.

Warmly,

Sean Gibbons
Executive Director
The Communications Network

