**Headline:** 11 Communications Rules for Activists to Live by

**Teaser:** Advice learned through 50 years of progressive media activism.

By David Fenton

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**[Article Body:]**

For more than 50 years, I have been a progressive media activist.

During my half-century of activism, I’ve learned how to use the media for social change, starting in the late 1960s, an era when idealists, activists, and utopians did so brilliantly, even dominating popular culture. Alas, today that’s all changed.

Reflecting back on a lifetime of media organizing, here is what I have learned, the precepts that can power progressives to success. Unfortunately, today’s Republicans apply them much more effectively than Democrats and progressives. Please note: Good ideas do not sell themselves. Use the following principles to advance your cause.

I started thinking about all of this as a high school dropout in New York City. At that time, Martin Luther King was choreographing television to spread the moral imperatives of civil rights into every home. Anti-Vietnam War campaigners and draft resistors often achieved equal billing with the war itself, using brilliant tactics to get news coverage. The Black Panthers were on TV resisting police violence, spreading Black pride, and feeding breakfast to poor children. In 1970, millions turned out for the first Earth Day, leading to landmark environmental legislation. The Beatles, Jefferson Airplane, the Doors, and so many other musicians spread progressive values—and personal liberation—to huge audiences.

In the 1960s, political and cultural progressives often dominated popular culture and the news. But then, the left started to lose its connections with the U.S. public, while the right eventually triumphed with think tanks, talk radio, Fox News, and a sophisticated online disinformation machine. We built no such infrastructure. So, we went from flower power to President Donald Trump. The accomplishments of the ‘60s have been lasting and profound: greater personal freedoms, more rights for women and the LGBTQ population, the end of Jim Crow segregation, the election of the first Black president, almost the end of pot persecution, greater sexual freedom, freedom from stultifying religious and cultural norms, and the end of drafting hundreds of thousands of soldiers to fight against popular uprisings abroad. We still have a long way to go on these issues, but we have made so much amazing progress. However, the failures of the ‘60s still haunt us. We totally failed when it comes to the most important political imperative of all, gaining power.

Reactionary, right-wing monopoly corporate forces are more in control of our country today than ever. They have brainwashed a large portion of the population. (As Jane Mayer concludes in her important book *Dark Money*, “What the Koch brothers really did was pay to change how Americans think.”) And now they threaten our democracy and even the very survival of humanity by attacking science while profiting from heating the globe with fossil fuels. All for a few companies and billionaires, while systemic racism still dominates America.

Why have progressives and Democrats been so much less effective at public communications than the right? Partly because people on the left look down on the idea of “selling” ideas. People from the liberal arts (or law or the sciences) are inculcated with the false belief that the facts persuade by themselves. They are up against people on the right who go to business school and who, to advance their careers, have mastered marketing, communications, and cognitive science to sell products and services. Ironically, they have triumphed by using communications principles we pioneered in the ‘60s, then largely abandoned.

Now, we are in a new era of activism, as young people rise up to conquer racism, protect science, ensure a livable planet, and fight for economic, racial, and gender justice. If we pay attention to the principles on the following pages, I am convinced we can win again. To ensure civilization’s very survival, we must. The great free-form radio newscaster of the 1960s, Wes “Scoop” Nisker of KSAN in San Francisco, coined a slogan we could all try to live by: “If you don’t like the news, go out and make your own!” So, I did.

**Communication Rules for Activists:**

**Craft simple messages everyone can understand.**

Use short, clear, and unpretentious language already in common use. Avoid jargon and wonky technical terms, and above all, avoid rhetoric. Not: “We have to cut carbon emissions.” Rather: “We have to stop pollution.” We may not like “Make America Great Again,” but it worked.

**Speak to the heart first, the mind second.**

Don’t just recite facts—they only work in stories that touch people’s emotions through moral narratives. Whoever holds the moral high ground wins. Not: “We have to get to net zero by 2050.” Rather: “Our children deserve a future, so we must act against polluters.”

**Stories need good and bad characters.**

People learn from stories about people. Think climate activist Greta Thunberg against the “blah, blah” politicians doing nothing.

**Repeat, repeat, repeat your messages.**

People learn from incessant repetition, which sticks in the brain, changing its very circuitry. Therefore, only the repetition of simple messages changes public opinion. Only when you are sick to death of saying the same thing over and over do you have any chance of breaking through. Repetition also creates political pressure on leaders. They know one-time messages or actions, like a demonstration, go away. Repetition forces leaders to pay attention.

**Practice framing issues your way.**

People think in what linguists call frames—existing circuitry in the brain formed by years of exposure to language. So, frame issues to activate people’s existing neural wiring. For example, when you say “pollution,” everyone thinks “bad.” When you say “carbon,” most people don’t know what to think, as there is little existing circuitry attached to the word. Also, don’t get suckered by responding to the other side’s framing, you’re only helping them if you repeat it. Not: “We aren’t taking away anyone’s jobs.” Rather: “Those who block climate action are allowing extreme weather to destroy our economy and jobs.”

**Use symbolism.**

Incorporate familiar images and phrases with cultural resonance (another form of framing). An apple a day keeps the doctor away. Three strikes and you’re out. Don’t judge a book by its cover. Pick symbols that are sticky, and hard to forget. For example: How much heat energy is climate change trapping on Earth? The same energy as exploding 600,000 atomic bombs a day.

**Tell the truth.**

Spin is deceit. Expect your opponents to lie and mislead—don’t do it yourself. The truth is more powerful, and it’s the only ethical choice. You can simplify the truth but do not distort it. If you make mistakes quickly admit them and move on.

**Ensure you are reaching people by using advertising.**

Don’t assume your message is reaching the public. People can only act on information that reaches them. While you may not like a world awash in advertising, that’s the world we live in. If you’re not buying attention, you risk getting none. Digital advertising usually costs far less than most progressives think. You can also drop advertising bombs to change narratives and make news.

**Recruit celebrities, influencers, and cultural figures.**

They attract attention and have large followings. Recruit athletes, actors, rock stars, CEOS, and YouTube and Instagram influencers to promote your message. Think Lady Gaga on LGBTQ+ rights, Leonardo DiCaprio on climate, and John Legend on criminal justice reform.

**Fight falsehood and disinformation immediately.**

If you don’t, it can stick in people’s minds, enabling a big lie to become truth. To fight it, double down on all of the directives above. If a journalist is regurgitating disinformation, complain respectfully to them and their bosses too.

**It’s who you know.**

And who you get to know. In the media, as elsewhere, relationships are crucial. Get to know journalists, editors, social media decision-makers, and broadcasters. Most are inclined toward progressive ideals but need to trust activists. Take them to lunch. Throw parties. Go drinking with them. Unless they work for right-wing phony media like Fox, never treat journalists as the enemy. Understand the culture of news and news hooks. Use them to hook media coverage.