3. Changing the Conversation: A case study exploring the use of targeted science communication to influence national dialogue about cancer research in the United States

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Introduction

Over the last 40 years the one powerful metaphor, the “war on cancer,” has become ubiquitous in the lexicon of patients, physicians, scientists, and policy makers engaged in discussions about cancer. Though there are many reasons why these various groups find value in integrating this metaphor into their lives, the metaphor is problematic for those who must engage these audiences in conversations about the progress made in the field of cancer research. Generally, a war is only over when a winner is declared. In this case, that would require an approach or treatment that leads to the eradication of cancer. In the 1970s, this may have seemed like a reasonable goal, but our understanding of cancer biology has changed dramatically in the last 40 years.

We now know that a scientifically realistic outcome is that some cancers—relatively few—will be cured outright with amazingly successful treatments; we will be able to better prevent many cancers as we learn what triggers initiation and progression of cancer; most cancers will be diagnosed earlier and more thoroughly, allowing for better informed approaches to care; and the rest of cancers will be treated as chronic disease, vastly improving the length and quality of life of people living with cancer. Unfortunately, this narrative is not consistent with the “war” metaphor which requires an all or nothing resolution. Accordingly, the Office of Public Affairs and Research Communication at the National Cancer Institute has been engaged in various strategic science communication efforts intended to ensure that this more accurate framing is reflected in discussions among strategic stakeholder groups.

The birth of a metaphor

Shortly following the signing of the National Cancer Act on December 23, 1971, advocacy organizations in the United States began to herald what they now hailed as President Nixon’s “war on cancer”. Though Nixon never used these exact words, this did serve as a catchy rallying cry and neatly paraphrased what Nixon actually said in his State of the Union Address of 1971: “The time has come in America when the same kind of concentrated effort that split the atom and took man to the moon should be turned toward conquering this dread disease.”

By many accounts, this rallying cry has done great things for the field of cancer research. Thousands of activists have been motivated to contribute time, emotional support, and money to patients and researchers as part of the “war on cancer.” This was a war in which an ordinary citizen could feel empowered to engage, and for many years this collective action drove progress in research and clinical care resulting in significantly better patient outcomes than
were seen in 1971. Not only are incidence and death rates continuing to fall for the majority of cancer types, but the scientific community has a dramatically better understanding of how cancer develops and reacts in the body. However, this story of progress has regularly been eclipsed by media statements that we have lost or are losing the “war on cancer.”

Creating a new frame for progress

Given that the metaphor is so pervasive, the NCI public affairs team determined that it was unrealistic to expect that the “war on cancer” metaphor could be stricken from the cancer community’s lexicon. However, the team saw an opportunity to create a research-positive counter-narrative that reinforces the progress that has been made and redefines success based on what research has shown us about cancer. The desired outcome is that all high-level discussions on the topic of cancer research reflect this counter-narrative. To that end, the public affairs management team developed a three-tiered message matrix that captured central themes, subthemes, and proposed individual story lines that support the themes. There are three central themes, eight subthemes, and an infinite number of story lines that could be created to support the themes. It is important to note that the matrix was developed as a messaging tool to reach strategic stakeholder groups, including policy-makers, thought leaders, and other third party surrogates engaged in the cancer research and policy arena.

The central themes capture general concepts that reflect the current state of science and funding related to cancer research and treatment. The subthemes expand on the implications of this current state. It is these subthemes that capture the most important points that the Institute hopes are most openly reflected in the discussions about progress and future research direction. As research findings emerge, the findings can then be associated with the most appropriate theme and subtheme.

Strategic Integrated Communications Management

Once the strategic messages had been identified, the public affairs management team sought to integrate the use of these strategic messages throughout all public affairs channels and platforms. The following activities were identified as priority targets for integrating this content:

- Media relations
- Third party public affairs partners
- Research news and budget communications administrative tools

In most cases, integration strategies resulted in proactive content development and stakeholder outreach. However, the balance of proactive to reactive strategies varied by activity.

Media Relations

The NCI has two media relations functions: an historically robust and responsive public information function and a newly established proactive placement function. The strategic messages were integrated into both functions in order to ensure that media coverage of cancer
research appropriately reflected the message point identified in the message matrix, thus influencing the dialogue of strategic stakeholders exposed to this media coverage. On the responsive side, when requests were not on a specific research finding or an interview request for specific person, the team promoted matrix-supporting story lines and provided context and resources that reinforced the matrix themes. This was particularly important as the 40th anniversary of the National Cancer Act approached.

Proactive media relations activities also used the message matrix to guide story pitching and story placement. The Institute’s Director was very sensitive about calling broad attention to the anniversary of the National Cancer Act. However, there were other milestones that could be utilized throughout the year to set the stage for this dialogue, and a targeted effort could frame the conversation with critical stakeholders on the date of the Act’s anniversary. Additionally, the public affairs team arranged a radio interview with the Institute Director on the day of the anniversary of the Act on NPR’s Science Friday, which is closely followed by many of the strategic stakeholder groups intended to be the recipients of these messages.

Third party public affairs partners

There is a large network of organizations in the U.S. who have a vested interest in NCI’s success. These organizations include public policy think tanks, patient advocacy organizations, and research institutions who receive NCI funding. Most of these organizations also have sophisticated public affairs operations that support research communication, grass roots advocacy efforts, and fundraising. Through these activities, these stakeholders reach virtually all potential strategic audiences in addition to a wide range of more general public audiences who might be inclined to engage in discussions related to cancer research and policy. In 2011, the NCI Office of Public Affairs and Research Communication established a proactive public affairs team tasked specifically with reaching out to these public affairs partners.

There are hundreds of research institutions in the U.S. that receive funding from NCI. There are 66 NCI-designated cancer centers that are particularly aligned with NCI’s interests. The public affairs team focused primarily on efforts to strengthen relationships with these cancer centre PIOs. This required hiring a staff person specifically tasked with fostering strong working relationships with these PIOs. This staff person’s role is to engage in discussions with these PIOs about their communications and news activities and identify opportunities to partner on message development when strategic stakeholders will be targeted. In these activities, it has been very important that the matrix messages do not directly contradict the “war on cancer” metaphor since these centers find this metaphor to be a powerful fundraising message, and it is our desire to harmoniously integrate the matrix counter-narrative.

Research news and grant communications administrative tools

As a complement to these relationship-building exercises, NCI’s public affairs team engaged the grants administration team at its parent organization, the National Institutes of Health, to identify opportunities to integrate research-positive messaging in its externally facing activities. The grants administration office manages a publicly available database of all grants awarded by the 27 institutes and centres of the NIH. This database is used regularly as a resource by the media and policy makers. An approach to associating news releases and stories with the grants in the database was developed, and the team not only found a new channel
to push its messages, but is furthering public understanding of this research and its value by providing access to what is generally more lay friendly language on the topic. The NCI public affairs team began a pilot project in 2011 to feed such news releases and stories into this database.