

Connecting Modes of Communication

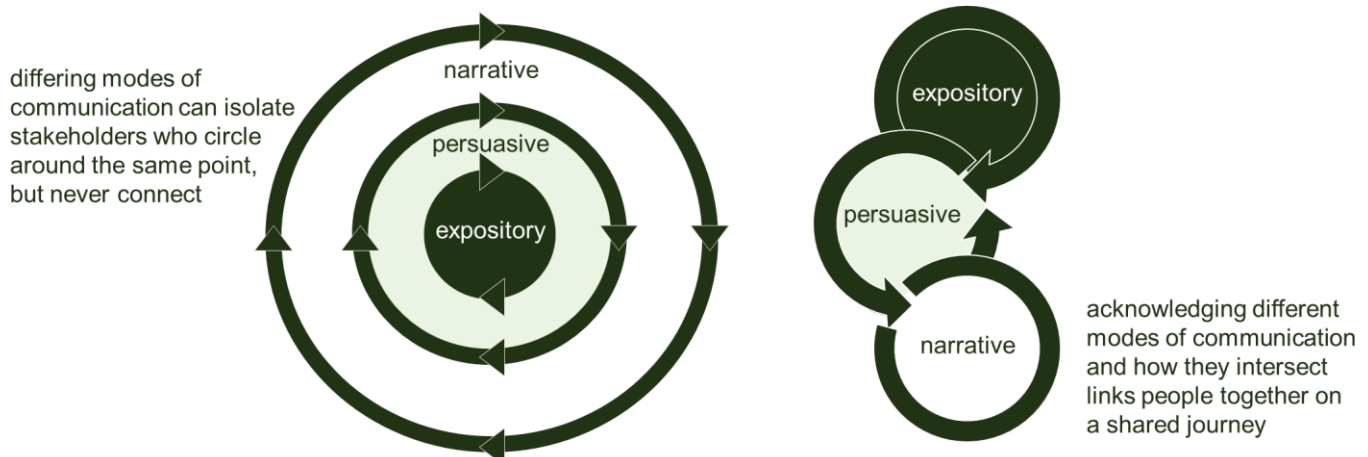
Politicians, people who work in publicly funded organisations, and the public tend to use different modes of communication. Politicians strive for persuasion, public servants focus on exposition, and the public relates to stories. Different ways of communicating often get in the way of understanding, preventing good ideas from getting off the ground. Sometimes, rather than a failure of public policy, what we have here is a failure to communicate.

People use different modes of communication to achieve different purposes. All are valid in the right circumstances, and the different biases of policy makers, policy workers, and members of the public have developed to meet their needs over time.

People who work in publicly funded organisations tend to emphasise facts, in part, because the services and information they provide must be grounded in evidence. Politicians rely on persuasive soundbites and slogans to convey simple messages that build support among broad audiences. Members of the public, as humans have done for millennia, understand the world through narratives. People's views on public need are informed by their experiences and the stories they hear from, and tell, the people around them.

Relying too heavily on one mode of communication can get in the way of clear communication with people who prefer a different mode. This can cause frustrating miscommunications even among people with common goals. When people disagree, it can be impossible for perspectives expressed using different modes to be heard or understood. This can lead to missed opportunities and resentment between the parties that reinforce our differences, rather than bridging them.

Messages that stick entirely to the facts can easily be overlooked by an intended audience. Too much focus on persuasion, by contrast, can lead to weak policies being pursued. Repeated exposure to what the public perceives as irrelevant jargon or empty promises can quickly become clichés that are tuned out entirely.



Successful communication about policy issues or proposals requires the individual and collective strengths of all three modes.

When public stories highlight concern about the effects of climate change, the stories alone are not enough to address those concerns. When politicians announce climate goals, their slogans alone are not enough. When scientists and policy workers conduct research and publish findings, the facts alone are not enough.

We need to remember when, and how, to use each mode to connect us with common goals, rather than separate into tribes. Public narratives signal issues that become political priorities, triggering expository work to identify solutions to be shared persuasively in ways that interact with, and shape, public narratives.

It is easier to recognise shared goals among different points of view about the world and how we talk about it, when we recognise the value of connecting the modes. When we are clear about their respective contributions, switching between modes is like passing the baton of an issue or idea between members of a team. Bringing all three modes together, in all stages of policy exploration and implementation, helps all perspectives to be heard and considered, regardless of how they are expressed.

Richer modes of communication make it easier to exchange complex ideas, reducing reliance on shallow slogans and simplistic ideas. Better, and better targeted, communication builds understanding and trust, so that ideas can be judged fairly on their merits, not shackled by a failure to communicate.