

# CHARITABLE GIVING IN MASS MEDIA

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Content, Perceptions and Outcomes

## ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH LANDSCAPE

**PREPARED FOR:**

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

**PREPARED BY:**

USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center  
Erica L. Rosenthal, PhD, Director of Research  
Camille J. Saucier, MCM, Research Specialist

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mass media play a powerful role in shaping our perceptions of the world. Further, media organizations play an “agenda-setting” role, determining the content we are exposed to and the lenses of “frames” through which we interpret this content. To increase charitable giving behavior, it is essential to understand the narratives about giving that are conveyed through media and how the audience of potential donors responds to these messages. There is relatively little research on charitable giving in general, and even less on media messages and coverage related to charitable giving. This report summarizes the available literature on this topic and draws upon a number of related literatures. We conclude with a series of evidence-based communication strategies for motivating charitable giving.

## Charitable Giving Content

### Media Framing

- The media’s framing of social problems influences perceptions of who is responsible for causing these problems, and who should be responsible for solving them.
- *Episodic frames* are those that attribute problems to individual actions, placing responsibility on those in need; *thematic frames* are those that treat problems as a consequence of larger structural or systemic factors, placing responsibility on those in power.
- There is little research on media framing of charitable giving specifically, but a considerable literature on framing of poverty. This topic is particularly relevant to charitable giving because judgments of responsibility for poverty may influence perceptions of effective solutions, including individual giving.
- Television news is more likely than print news to use episodic frames, treating poverty as an individual failure, as are conservative news outlets. Content using this type of framing may be sympathetic, but rarely presents the context behind social inequities.
- Episodic frames tend to increase stigma and reduce audience willingness to help. They can lead to audience apathy, cynicism, and a lack of efficacy—the belief that nothing can be done to solve the problem.
- A study comparing print media coverage of charitable giving in the U.S. and Australia found U.S. media tend to frame giving in terms of individual responsibility (specifically the wealthy). In contrast, Australian media tend to frame “giving” as the responsibility of the government, resulting in a less prominent culture of individual giving.

## **Media Coverage of Charitable Organizations and Issues**

- The research we found on media coverage of charitable organizations pertains exclusively to news media.
- News stories on charitable organizations are rarely “headliners” and are much more likely to be found in local than national newspapers.
- Coverage of charitable organizations favors those with greater financial resources, that provide services or offer volunteer opportunities. Organizations that are locally embedded represent a disproportionately large share of local media coverage.
- Media coverage tends to focus on concrete outcomes at the expense of the broader picture, such as the values and motives behind the work of charitable organizations. As discussed previously, most news stories use episodic framing.
- Coverage of charitable organizations tends to be positive, with stories about specific organizations rated more positively than those about the nonprofit sector as a whole.

## **Charitable Giving Perceptions and Outcomes**

### **Public Perceptions of Charitable Organizations**

- There is little research on perceptions of charitable organizations specifically, but nonprofit organizations are generally perceived positively in the U.S. These perceptions, as well as individual giving and volunteering rates, have remained relatively stable since the 1960s.
- Public perceptions of, and confidence in, nonprofits can be briefly tarnished in the event of significant negative press (such as coverage of the American Red Cross response to 9/11). There is little evidence, however, of a widespread “crisis of legitimacy” in the nonprofit sector.
- An organization’s reputation and image are central to overall perceptions. Reputation is influenced by financial performance, while image is a broader category including perceptions of caring and compassion, as well as financial efficiency. Efficiency refers to the proportion of donations that go toward mission-related activities. Perceived efficiency is an especially important variable influencing donation behavior.
- A focus group study of teenagers in New Zealand found that they perceive charitable appeals as manipulative, but nonetheless find the manipulation acceptable because of its prosocial purpose. Participants reconciled feelings of guilt by blaming the victim or determining there is nothing they can do to make a difference.

## Factors that Motivate Charitable Giving

- There is a wide body of research into the social, psychological, and demographic factors that motivate individual giving. Several key factors are discussed.
- Physical distance: People are more willing to donate to local causes than those that are further away. Audiences feel less emotionally affected by portrayals of suffering further away and feel less responsible for reducing this suffering. Messages that create an emotional connection to a single, identifiable beneficiary can overcome the effects of a large geographic distance.
- Psychological distance: This includes social distance (how similar), temporal distance (how far in the future), and hypothetical distance (how likely).
- Vivid imagery: Images of the potential beneficiary can improve recall and donations when the images are related to the message content and match the overall message framing.
- Information about programs: Telling a potential donor about how their money will be spent or about specific programs can increase donations.
- Need to belong: Individuals are more likely to donate (and donate in larger amounts) when told others are donating, particularly when those donors are similar. People are more likely to give when their donation activity will be public and conspicuous.
- Anchoring: Providing a suggested donation amount (or several) increases the amount donated without affecting the likelihood of donating. This signals that others donate a large (but believable) sum.

## Impact of Charitable Giving Campaigns

- News coverage of disasters is associated with increased humanitarian aid to the affected region, but some regions tend to receive more coverage—and aid—than others.
- The Give Five campaign—encouraging people to give 5% of their income to charity and volunteer 5 hours a week—had mixed effectiveness. It increased volunteer rates but had little effect on financial donations.
- Research commissioned by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation on the #GivingTuesday campaign indicates:
  - The campaign has a positive impact on first-time donations and created the potential to expand to other countries.
  - “Call to Action” donate buttons on charity pages are a significant source of donations.
  - Offering time-limited matches prior to #GivingTuesday and lowering the cost of donations can increase overall giving, donation amounts, and pull in new donors.
  - Women are more likely than men to participate in #GivingTuesday.

## Conclusion

- Evidence-based communication strategies for eliciting individual giving include the following:
  1. **Get Personal:** Note similarities between the potential donor and beneficiary.
  2. **Right Here, Right Now:** Focus on the local impact of donations and how the issue is occurring in the present.
  3. **Vivid Images:** Use images that depict the beneficiary of charitable appeals, are related to the message content, and match the message framing.
  4. **Be Specific:** How will donations be spent and how they will help beneficiaries in need?
  5. **Face in the Crowd:** Note how much similar others have given and allow donors to make their donations public.
  6. **Anchors Aweigh:** Request a specific donation amount or provide several suggested donation levels.
- Insights from the landscape analysis will inform forthcoming research activities, including two content analyses (a TV snapshot and 10-year retrospective analysis of scripted TV and film) and a public opinion survey.
- The content analysis codebooks will measure the topics covered in news stories, the frequency of “negative” mentions (focused on distrust and scams), gain vs. loss framing, episodic vs. thematic framing, and the prevalence of factors such as appeals to geographic or psychological proximity.
- The survey instrument might address public sentiment toward different types of charities, the importance of efficiency, the relative efficacy of episodic vs. thematic framing (particularly with regard to support for public vs. private sector solutions), and the importance of factors such as geographic and psychological proximity to giving decisions.

# INTRODUCTION

According to recent estimates, \$410 billion was donated to charitable causes in the United States in 2017, with individual donors representing 70% of this total (Giving USA Foundation, 2018). While donation amounts have been on the increase since 1977, charitable giving is a relatively small area of academic inquiry. In particular, there is very little research on how charitable giving is represented or covered in mass media. Media messages are a well-established factor in shaping social norms, attitudes, and behavior on a wide variety of issues. Thus, to motivate increased individual giving in the U.S., it is first necessary to understand the messages individuals receive about charitable giving through mass media and how they respond to such messages.

## **Media Agenda Setting and Framing**

On average, Americans consume more than 11 hours of media every day (The Nielsen Company, 2018). Research has shown that mass media organizations, and particularly news organizations, can serve an important “agenda setting” role by selecting which content audiences are exposed to and therefore which topics audiences think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1993; Wanta, Golan, & Lee, 2004; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2006). For instance, while news audiences may assume the content they consume is all-inclusive, this is simply not feasible; content creators and editors determine what information to provide. They also dictate how a story is told, determining which events are emphasized and how they should be understood (Weaver, 2007; McCombs, 2018).

The effects of media agenda setting are not unique to the United States (Zhou & Moy, 2007; Kim, Han, Choi, & Kim, 2012) and have been demonstrated in numerous health and public interest domains. For example, research indicates cancers that receive frequent media coverage are perceived to be more common (Jensen et al., 2014). This disproportionate focus can have far reaching effects, as media coverage has been found to relate to perceptions of cancer severity and disparities in research funding (Jensen et al., 2013; Jensen et al., 2014). Media coverage can shape social norms—what audiences believe to be popular social sentiments—and values and has consequences for public attitudes and policy support (Saguy, Frederick, & Gruys, 2014).

The agenda-setting function of mass media is important to consider in relation to charitable giving, particularly because mass media serve as an efficient platform for charitable organizations to reach diverse audiences and potential donors. Media framing of issues related to charitable giving could

influence perceptions of the source and nature of the “problem,” available solutions, and who is responsible for solving it.

## **Objectives and Approach**

This landscape analysis is part of a larger Gates Foundation-funded project to identify the dominant narratives around individual giving in the U.S. The overarching goal of this effort is to understand the role of media and popular culture in framing messages about charitable giving, and thereby inform the potential role of the Foundation in supporting the development of new narratives.

This report draws upon the published academic literature, as well as reports commissioned by The Foundation. We initially attempted to limit the scope to the last 15 years, but due to the relative scarcity of research on media representations of charitable giving, we incorporated older research as well. We also expanded the scope to draw upon several related literatures, including media framing of related issues (such as poverty), public perceptions of nonprofits (beyond charitable organizations), and the factors underlying the effectiveness of charitable appeals (not necessarily media campaigns). It is further important to note that “charity” and “charitable giving” are not well-defined concepts in the literature. For example, charitable giving can refer to financial or non-monetary contributions (e.g. volunteering, food donations, organ donations).

Our review sought to answer the following research questions:

- How do mass media frame charitable giving and related issues?
- How do mass media cover charitable organizations and issues?
- How do audiences perceive charitable organizations, and how do these perceptions relate to media coverage?
- What factors are known to motivate charitable giving?
- How effective are charitable giving campaigns such as “GivingTuesday”?

After surveying the literature, we conclude with a series of evidence-based communication strategies for eliciting individual giving, along with insights to inform our forthcoming content analysis and survey research.



# CHARITABLE GIVING IN MASS MEDIA

## Media Framing

Although there is little research on media framing of charitable giving specifically, a growing literature addresses media representation of various social issues. As noted previously, media framing can influence perceptions of who is responsible for causing social problems, and who should be responsible for solving them. One particularly prominent focus in the framing literature is poverty. Certainly, we do not wish to conflate efforts to ameliorate poverty with the entirety of charitable giving. Poverty is just one of many social problems addressed by charitable organizations, but according to one estimate (Rooney et al., 2007), it represents nearly one-third of combined individual and philanthropic giving. Other major areas of giving include arts, education, and religion, particularly congregational operations. We contend that media framing of poverty issues is particularly relevant to charitable giving because judgments of responsibility for poverty (individual vs. systemic failure) directly inform perceptions of effective solutions (e.g., individual giving, philanthropic giving, government investment).

*Episodic frames* are those that place responsibility for social problems on those most in need, focusing on individual-level actions. In the context of poverty, episodic frames focus on individual shortcomings (e.g., lack of effort, dependency). On the other hand, *thematic frames* treat poverty as a consequence of larger structural or systemic inequities (Kim, Carvalho, & Davis, 2010; Kim, Shanahan, & Choi, 2012). Research on episodic and thematic framing overlaps significantly with attribution theory, which examines how people assign blame and form social stigmas. Multiple studies have examined content frames and judgments of responsibility in relation to poverty, domestic violence, AIDS patients, and obesity. Episodic frames that lay responsibility on the subject tend to increase stigma and reduce audience willingness to help (Saguy et al., 2014; Weiner, 1993; Iyengar, 1987; Anastasio & Costa, 2004; Ryan, Anastasio & DaCunha, 2006; Savani, Stephens, & Markus, 2011; Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013; Pearl & Lebowitz, 2014). A study of the effects of framing on support for mandatory minimum sentencing (Gross, 2008) found that episodic framing increased emotional engagement in terms of increasing sympathy and pity, but thematic framing was ultimately more persuasive. Thematic versus episodic framing of charitable appeals could similarly influence perceptions of a charitable cause or organization, and potentially impact intentions to donate.

Media platform, company, and issue topic can inform how content is framed. For example, television news is more likely than print news to use individual-level, episodic frames (Kim & Anne Willis, 2007). Conservative news outlets are also more likely to use episodic frames that place responsibility on the individual, compared to liberal news outlets (Kim et al. 2010). Content analyses of media coverage of poverty suggest that even when sympathetic to the poor, content with episodic framing rarely presents the context and systemic barriers that underpin and perpetuate inequities (Bullock, Fraser Wyche, & Williams, 2001). Coverage with episodic framing can lead to reader apathy, cynicism, and a lack of efficacy—the belief that nothing can be done to solve the problem (Kensicki, 2004).

A 2011 content analysis (McDonald & Scaife) examined media framing of charitable giving, particularly the ways in which media framing reflects and maintains implicit cultural values. The study compared U.S. and Australian print media coverage of philanthropy and charitable giving. While coverage in both countries was positive, there were differences in perceived solutions to social problems. In U.S. media content, philanthropy was typically framed in terms of individual responsibility, particularly as the responsibility of the wealthy. Conversely, in Australian media, philanthropy was more likely to be framed as the responsibility of the government, rather than individuals, thus resulting in a less prominent culture of individual giving. These frames also appeared to influence the cultural value of charitable giving as Australian media often portrayed philanthropy as more “normal” and less celebrated, whereas media in the U.S. tended to portray philanthropy as “exceptional.”

## **Media Coverage of Charitable Organizations and Issues**

Mass media do not frequently cover charitable giving or the philanthropic sector more generally (Greenberg & Walters, 2004; Hale, 2007), but what little coverage exists is predominantly in news media. Newspaper stories about nonprofits and philanthropies are rarely “headliners” (among the first 10 stories in the paper), with most of these articles appearing in the remaining 73% of the paper (Hale, 2007). Stories about nonprofits are much more likely to be found in local than national newspapers (Kensicki, 2004; Hale, 2007).

Media coverage of charitable organizations tends to be skewed in favor of those with greater financial resources, and there are differences in coverage depending on the cause and type of services delivered (Greenberg & Walters, 2004). Charitable organizations that provide services or

offer volunteer opportunities receive greater media coverage (Deacon, Fenton, & Walker, 1995) as do organizations that work on more “newsworthy” issues, such as education and the environment (Gant & Dimmick, 2000). Other studies have found nonprofit organizations that are more locally embedded and use a larger number of volunteers represent a disproportionately large share of local media coverage (Nah, 2009). This coverage gap has been attributed to the ability of well-resourced charitable organizations to pay for media attention and advertising time; the type of media outlet such as broadsheet press rather than tabloids, and the type of organizational activity (Deacon et al., 1995). This study also found that “cuddly” charities serving children, the elderly, animals, or those with terminal illnesses were better able to create emotional messaging and attract financial contributions.

A common theme in the literature is a tension between media and nonprofits, which can result in content that inaccurately represents the activities and goals of the organization (Onishi, 2010). For example, media tend to focus on concrete outcomes, such as event impacts, while ignoring the broader picture, such as the values and motives behind the work of charitable organizations (Deacon, 1996; Rausch, 2007). A content analysis by Hale (2007) similarly found that most stories were told in an episodic format, focusing on specific events and individual actions independent of social influences and institutions. This episodic framing leads to content that is more easily ignored by audiences (Nowland-Foreman, 2005) and undermines nonprofit organizations’ trust in media (Onishi).

Media coverage of charitable organizations tends to be positive. In the Hale study, 25% of news stories were rated as very favorable and only 10% as very negative. Stories about specific organizations were also generally rated more positive than those about the nonprofit sector as a whole. That said, there are examples of negative coverage, such as stories that frame an act of philanthropy as self-serving, rather than altruistically motivated (McDonald & Scaife).

# CHARITABLE GIVING PERCEPTIONS AND OUTCOMES

## Public Perceptions of Charitable Organizations

There is little research addressing perceptions of charitable organizations specifically, but the broader class of nonprofit organizations is generally perceived positively in the U.S., due to their prosocial purpose (McDonald & Scaife, 2011). Nonprofits are generally perceived to be warmer and friendlier than private sector organizations, though they are also viewed as somewhat less competent (Aaker, Vohs, & Mogilner, 2010).

Positive perceptions of nonprofits are relatively stable over time. Similarly, individual giving rates have remained around 2% of U.S. personal disposable income since 1966 (O'Neill, 2009; Giving USA Foundation, 2017). However, in the event of a scandal or financial mismanagement, these perceptions can be tarnished, at least briefly. For example, in the early 2000s, media coverage often focused on major scandals committed by organizations like United Way and The American Red Cross. Several studies have found that such scandals can shake public confidence in the accountability of these organizations, leading to skepticism and reduced trust (Gibelman & Gelman, 2001; Bekkers, 2003; Gibelman & Gelman, 2004; Greenberg & Walters, 2004; Light, 2008; Hind, 2017). Some scholars (e.g., Salamon, 2002) have claimed nonprofits were facing a crisis of legitimacy during this time period. However, there is scant evidence to support such a crisis. Since the late 1960s, there has been little change and even some growth in positive public perceptions, donations, and volunteerism rates. Thus, even in the event of significant negative press for several large charitable organizations, this does not appear to affect perceptions of the broader nonprofit sector.

The positive social aura of nonprofits and charitable giving has been leveraged in trends like celebrity-philanthropy relationships (e.g., “celanthropy,” “charitainment,” “philanthrocapitalism”), used to enhance or use their social capital to draw attention to a charitable cause (Poniewozik & Keegan, 2005; Hwang, 2010). This trend even extends to other countries such as China (Jeffreys, 2015), though research suggests Chinese celebrity endorsements have little effect on subsequent media attention (Hassid & Jeffreys, 2015). Studies indicate that celebrity endorsements can increase donation intentions when there is a perceived fit between the endorser and the charity (Ilicic & Baxter, 2014). However, there are concerns that this form of philanthropic coverage leads

to the commercialization of philanthropy and public desensitization to the cause (Nickel & Eikenberry, 2009).

Surveys conducted in the U.S. and the U.K. indicate that public perceptions of charitable organizations are closely tied to their image and reputation. For example, Bennett and Gabriel (2003) found a charity's reputation is influenced by its financial performance, while image is drawn from perceptions of the organization as caring and compassionate, non-political, dynamic, and financially efficient. In particular, efficiency—a greater proportion of each dollar going toward mission-related activities (rather than administrative costs)—has been found to be a key factor in overall perceptions (e.g., Dalton et al., 2008). Efficiency is especially important as donations have been found to decrease as cost-per-dollar rises (Grizzle, 2015). Further, charitable organizations that allow donors to restrict donations to specific purposes have been found to receive more donations than those that do not, particularly among those organizations with low reported efficiency (Li, McDowell, & Hu, 2012).

Although there is little research on how media coverage of charitable organizations influences perceptions, we do know about how people understand and respond to charitable appeals. For example, a focus group study of teenagers New Zealand (Dalton et al.) had them watch nine short charity appeal videos. Participants understood the appeals were intended to evoke sympathy and guilt and perceived them as manipulative. However, the manipulation was perceived as acceptable because they were understood to be for a beneficial cause. Participants also noted the potential for fatigue, explaining that because these campaigns were so common, repetitive, and obvious in their appeals, they were easy to ignore. To reconcile their feelings of guilt over not donating, participants in this study reported constructing victim-blaming arguments (e.g., “it's their fault”) or developing a narrative of reduced efficacy (e.g., “what can I do?”).

## **Factors that Motivate Charitable Giving**

There is a wide body of research into the factors that motivate individual giving. One literature review (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011) identified several factors underlying the decision to give: (1) awareness of the need; (2) having been solicited to donate; (3) the cost and benefits of donating (including amount requested, ease of donating, and any social benefits or donation incentives); (4) altruistic motives; (5) social status and donation reputation; (6) positive psychological benefits of donating; (7) the desire to maintain self-image (“I am a giving person”); (8) personally held charitable values; and (9) self- and outcome- efficacy, the belief that one can perform an action and the

perception that the action will lead to a desired outcome. Another study (Breeze, 2013) found people choose to donate to specific charities based on personal taste, personal experiences, a desire for impact, and perceptions of charity competence and efficiency. Donors often feel a personal connection with the work of these organizations (Payton & Moody, 2008). Giving behavior is also related to demographic factors; older adults are more likely to donate, and to give larger amounts (Carpenter et al., 2008; Smith, 2012).

Below, we summarize research on a number of factors known to relate to individual charitable giving. Later, we provide strategic communication recommendations drawn from these factors.

## **Physical Distance**

A key variable influencing the effectiveness of charitable appeals is the distance between an issue or beneficiary and the potential donor. People are more willing to donate to causes that they perceive are nearby than causes that they feel are further away (Touré-Tillery & Fishbach, 2017). This is in part because people believe their donations will have more impact locally. Local issues also tend to be more salient with audiences (Rooney et al., 2007; Powers & Yaros, 2013). Geographic distance has also been found to reduce emotional impact, such that audiences feel less emotionally affected by portrayals of suffering further away (Small, Loewenstein & Slovic, 2007). This research also indicates that audiences tend to feel less responsible for the suffering of people who live further away (Baron & Miller, 2000; Erlandsson, Björklund & Bäckström, 2015). One experimental study (Kogen & Dilliplane, 2017) found that geographic distance can be overcome by framing suffering as either solvable or unsolvable. Unsolvable problems generate sympathy, whereas solvable problems promote self-efficacy, and both increase willingness to help (the study did not examine giving as an outcome).

## **Psychological Distance**

Distance refers not only to the geographic disparity between the potential donor and the beneficiary, but also psychological distance. This includes social distance (how similar to me?), temporal distance (how far from the present?), and hypothetical distance (how certain or likely?). Messages that create an emotional connection can overcome the effects of a large geographic distance. Research has shown that people are most responsive and emotionally empathetic when there is a single, “identifiable” beneficiary with whom they can personally identify (Small & Loewenstein, 2003; Kogut & Ritov, 2005; Slovic, 2010). People tend to care more about a single, identifiable victim than a group of people who statistically are more “in-need” (Small et al, 2007).

Media framing can affect how distant a problem seems, by describing aspects of the problem that are geographically, temporally, socially, or hypothetically closer to the audience. By altering the perceived psychological distance, media coverage can impact not only public understanding of the issue, but also how people feel about contributing towards the issue (Dalton et al., 2008; Small, 2011).

## **Vivid Imagery**

Charitable appeals with images depicting the potential beneficiary have been shown to improve recall and donations, compared to appeals without images (Houts, Doak, Doak, & Loscalzo, 2006). Images that are related to the message content aid attention and recall (Houston, Childers, Heckler, 1987; McGill & Anand, 1989), but unrelated images can hinder recall (Smith & Shaffer, 2000). Images have also been found to increase the effectiveness of message framing and enhance the vividness of a message. Studies indicate that charity appeals are more persuasive when the vivid details and images presented in a message match the message frame, so that negative images match a negative message and positive images match positive messages (Chang & Lee, 2010).

## **Information about Programs**

Studies have found that simply telling potential donors about how their money would be spent or about an organization's specific programs increased donations (Cryder, Loewenstein, & Scheines, 2013). For instance, charities have used this strategy by asking donors to support specific children and providing donors with information on exactly how this child will benefit (food, vaccinations, school tuition). Although this kind of aid is far from being the most effective mechanism of support, this strategy is popular because it personalizes the impact of donations.

## **Need to Belong**

Studies have shown that individuals who are told that others are donating to a campaign and how much they are donating are not only more likely to donate themselves but also to donate in similar amounts (Carman, 2003; Agerström, Carlsson, Nicklasson, Guntell, 2016). This effect becomes stronger the more similar the other donors are: for example, in terms of student identity, workplace, or salary level. This is particularly true if audience members are asked to donate by someone they know or are familiar with (Meer, 2011) and if the donation will be public (White & Peloza, 2009;

Winterich, Mittal, & Aquino, 2013; Böhm & Regner, 2013). Scholars suggest this could be due to peer pressure, or the desire to derive social benefits from peers for contributing toward a charitable cause (Zhang & Zhu, 2011).

Research indicates that personal reputation is central to giving decisions (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011). Most people prefer their donation activity to be public rather than private (Andreoni & Petrie, 2004); they are more likely to give in a public situation (Alpizar, Carlsson, & Johansson-Stenman, 2008; Alpizar & Martinsson, 2013), and when not giving may negatively affect their reputation (Barclay, 2004; Bateson, Nettle, & Roberts, 2006; Bereczkei, Birkas, & Kerekes, 2007).

Unsurprisingly, “conspicuous” helping (Grace & Griffin, 2006; West, 2004)—such as the display of empathy ribbons, pins, or other markers of altruism—is very popular with donors.

## **Anchoring**

Research indicates that it is possible to increase donation amounts by signaling that other people usually donate a larger, but believable sum, as long as there is not an already established amount that is usually donated (Feldhaus, Sobotta, & Werner, 2018). Alternatively, it is possible to set donation requests at a specific sum. Research in this area is mixed, but has generally shown that providing default requests can increase the mean donation rate (Edwards & List, 2014). Although low default requests can both increase donation rate, but also reduce the average donation amount (Goswami & Urminsky, 2016), the opposite effect may be true with larger donation amounts (Altmann, Falk, Heidhues, Jayaraman, & Teirlinck, 2018). Alternatively, giving a donation menu with several donation anchors was found to increase the average amount donated without affecting the likelihood of donation (Baggio & Motterlini, 2019). Existing donors typically look to their donation history to help determine how much they will give (Smith, Windmeijer, & Wright, 2015).

## **Impact of Charitable Giving Campaigns**

Research has found that increased media coverage can lead to greater donation behavior, particularly in the area of international disaster relief. News coverage of disasters is associated with increased humanitarian aid to the affected region in the U.S. and other countries (Van Belle, 2003; Rioux & Van Belle, 2005; Brown & Minty, 2008; Waters & Tindall, 2011; Martin, 2013). However, not all foreign disasters and humanitarian crises are covered equally in U.S. media. Some regions have been found to receive significantly more coverage—and thus more aid—than others (Olsen, Carstensen, & Høgen; Franks, 2006; Eisensee & Strömberg, 2007; Strömberg, 2007).



The effectiveness of media campaigns designed to promote charitable giving has been mixed. For example, the highly publicized "Give Five" campaign—which ran from 1987-1995—encouraged people to give 5% of their income to charity and volunteer 5 hours a week. The campaign was effective at increasing volunteering rates (by more than 30 minutes per week) but had little effect on financial donation rates (Yörük, 2012). This study did not examine the reasons for this disparity but the author speculated that it may be because media campaigns are more likely to reach people who are retired or otherwise have low opportunity costs of time.

Numerous studies on the impact of the #GivingTuesday campaign in the U.S. have been commissioned by the Gates Foundation.<sup>1</sup> Research conducted with Facebook (2017) found the campaign increased awareness of GivingTuesday, generated a spike in first-time donors, and created the potential to grow #GivingTuesday in other countries such as the U.K. This research also identified having "Call to Action" donate buttons on a charity page as a significant source of donations. Other studies of the campaign have found that offering time-limited matches prior to #GivingTuesday can increase overall giving (Ideas42, 2019) and lowering the cost of giving prior to #GivingTuesday can increase total donation amounts as well as pull in new donors (Bourns, Mochnacki, Rosenbaum, & Curran, 2018). Donors are particularly eager to give when provided with an opportunity such as a matched gift (DonorsChoose.org, 2015). Finally, women are more likely to participate in #GivingTuesday (Osili et al., 2017).

An evaluation of the Comic Relief Red Nose Day campaign in the UK (M&C Saatchi, 2018) found that for many young people, the campaign is their first exposure to international development issues, and can serve as a gateway to giving. The campaign places a large emphasis on developing strong local role models and fostering efficacy through its "You Can Make a Difference" philosophy. Those who participate show greater engagement in international development issues. Whereas audiences report feeling "bombarded" by the fundraising methods of major charities, they enjoy the novelty of Nose Day.

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<sup>1</sup> Additional research on the impact of #GivingTuesday is summarized in reports by DataKind and the Belfer Center for Innovation, among others: [https://www.givingtuesday.org/sites/default/files/2018-01/mc4971\\_is\\_pd\\_givtuedatadr\\_1-2018.pdf](https://www.givingtuesday.org/sites/default/files/2018-01/mc4971_is_pd_givtuedatadr_1-2018.pdf)  
[https://www.givingtuesday.org/sites/default/files/2018-05/GT%20IPSOS%20ALL%20COUNTRIES%202017%20\(May%202018\)%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.givingtuesday.org/sites/default/files/2018-05/GT%20IPSOS%20ALL%20COUNTRIES%202017%20(May%202018)%20(1).pdf)

# CONCLUSION

## Communication Strategies to Elicit Individual Giving

There is a wide body of research on the factors that underlie the effectiveness of charitable appeals, including physical and psychological distance, use of imagery, programmatic information, need to belong, and anchoring donation amounts. Here, we provide evidence-based communication strategies for leveraging these features to promote individual giving.

### 1. Get Personal

- Note similarities between the potential donor and beneficiary. Even if the physical distance is great, the more similar and relevant to the audience, the less distant the cause will seem.

### 2. Right Here, Right Now

- Focus on the local impact of donations. People tend to care more about issues that pertain to where they live or that could affect them directly.
- Focus on how the issue or problem (or identified need) occurs in the present as opposed to far in the future, or relate to events that the audience currently experiences. People tend to put more weight on short-term consequences.

### 3. Vivid Images

- Use images to depict the beneficiary of charitable appeals. Try to feature only one potential beneficiary and avoid using statistical information.
- Make sure the images are related to the message content, and match the message framing. Negative images should be accompanied by a negative message and positive images by a positive message.

### 4. Be Specific

- Be specific about how donations will be spent and how they will help beneficiaries in need. Discuss specific programs and outcomes whenever possible.
- Highlight the efficiency of the organization — the percentage of every dollar that goes toward programming.

### 5. Face in the Crowd

- Highlight how much others (particularly similar others) have given, as well as the positive social status that accompanies giving.
- Allow donors to make their donations public and offer conspicuous displays of altruism, such as empathy ribbons or pins.

### 6. Anchors Aweigh

- Request a specific donation amount or provide several suggested donation levels. New donors will search for cues to determine how much to donate when asked, often looking to the behavior of others or requested donation amounts for an anchor-point.

## Insights for Further Research

The objective of this landscape analysis was to summarize existing research on media coverage of charitable giving, as it relates to the overarching goal of this project: identifying and ultimately shifting dominant narratives about individual giving in the U.S. This analysis was conducted in tandem with in-depth interviews of key stakeholders in philanthropy, media, and those who bridge the two spheres. Next, we will be conducting two complementary content analyses of charitable giving mentions in TV and film, and a survey of public opinion related to giving. Insights from the landscape analysis will inform these forthcoming research activities. The content analyses include:

- A **snapshot of mentions of charitable giving topics on TV** (including news, scripted and unscripted entertainment, sports, ads, and more) on more than 900 stations. This analysis will be conducted twice: during “giving season” and a “control” month. It will include basic analysis of all mentions (genre, topic, viewership) and in-depth analysis of a subset of mentions.
- A **10-year retrospective analysis of mentions of charitable giving topics in scripted TV and film**. This analysis will include basic analysis of all mentions (genre, topic) and in-depth analysis of a subset of mentions.

## Insights for Content Analysis

- This analysis found that there is relatively little media coverage of charitable giving, it exists predominantly in news media, and tends to favor large organizations and cuddly causes. The TV snapshot content analysis will reveal whether these findings are replicated with respect to the topics covered in news media stories.

- Research indicates media coverage of charitable organizations is overwhelming positive. Our TV content analysis will include a topic category that examines the frequency of untrustworthy charities, fundraising scams, or general warnings about charitable giving. The in-depth content analyses will delve further into the sentiment of charitable giving mentions.
- Much of the literature implicitly frames charitable giving in terms of solutions to “problems” (loss framing) rather than societal benefits (gain framing). The in-depth content analyses will examine not just sentiment of charitable giving mentions but also whether they are framed in terms of gains or losses.
- Our findings suggest that episodic framing of issues related to charitable giving, particularly poverty, is common in TV news. The in-depth content analyses will measure the extent to which depictions (in news and beyond) use episodic or thematic framing.
- The research reviewed here highlights a number of factors known to motivate giving. The in-depth content analyses might examine the prevalence of several of these factors, such as appeals to geographic proximity and similarity (part of psychological proximity), use of imagery, emphasis on others’ donation activities, or providing anchors.

## Insights for Survey

- Public perceptions of nonprofit organizations tend to be positive, and these perceptions have remained relatively stable over the last 50 years. Our survey will measure public sentiment toward different types of charities.
- Efficiency—the proportion of donations that go toward supporting mission-related activities—have been found to be central to overall perceptions and predictive of donation behavior. The survey could examine the importance of perceived efficiency relative to other factors, and for different types of charities.
- Research suggests episodic framing increases cynicism and stigma, and can reduce efficacy and willingness to help. Thematic framing, while less frequent, can be effective in other domains. One key question is whether a shift from episodic to thematic framing of charitable giving would actually boost donation rates, or alternatively place the onus on the public sector to provide remedies. That is, when the underlying issues are framed as systemic in nature, do individuals think the government, rather than individuals, should be doing the “giving.” The survey could examine this question to some extent by correlating responses to episodic- and thematic-framed messages with attitudes toward government spending on social welfare programs.
- Finally, the factors that motivate charitable giving will inform the survey questions. For example, we might examine whether respondents are more likely to give to local causes and

organizations and the underlying reasons for this tendency. Is it because they anticipate the issue might affect them personally or because they feel their contributions will have greater impact?

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