

LAB REPORT

AN IRON LIGHT LABS PRODUCT

Content is King

*EARNING ATTENTION AND INFLUENCE IN THE
INFORMATION AGE*

By Austin Berg

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AUSTIN BERG
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Introduction: The Knot

“TURN HIM TO ANY CAUSE OF POLICY, THE GORDIAN KNOT OF IT HE WILL UNLOOSE FAMILIAR AS HIS GARTER”

– SHAKESPEARE, HENRY V

At the center of an ancient city in an ancient land stood an ancient cart tied with an ancient knot. The cart once belonged to King Gordius, a poor farmer who became a great ruler.

For generations, this cart stood in the city of Gordius as an offering to the gods. Its yoke was tied to a post with what one Roman historian later described as "several knots all so tightly entangled that it was impossible to see how they were fastened." A prophecy foretold that any man who could unravel this Gordian Knot was destined to become ruler of all of Asia.

Many men tried. The strongest among them would pull with all their might and leave dejected. The smartest would devise brain-bending schemes to loosen it and fail.

When Alexander the Great arrived at the city of Gordium in 333 B.C., he became fascinated with the knot. After wrestling with it to no avail, he stepped back from the gnarled mess and declared, "It makes no difference how they are loosed." He then drew his sword and sliced the knot in half. Fulfilling the prophecy, Alexander conquered most of the known world.

More than 1,000 years later, one of the earliest appearances of the Gordian Knot in popular culture came in the context of politics. Shakespeare's titular character in Henry V is praised for his ability to "unloose" the Gordian knots of policy.

Think tanks, nonprofits, political parties and other impact organizations encounter these knots every day. In the face of their complexity, many focus on developing the most logically sound arguments, sophisticated research methods or effective fundraising tools.



Introduction: The Knot *CONT.*

But whatever their aim – whatever the composition of their “knot” – every change-maker must ultimately compete for attention, elicit an emotional response and compel action.

Effective content cuts the knot. And Bill Gates crowned it king.

In his prophetic 1996 essay, “Content is King,” Gates laid out the case for why content would be where much of the real money was made on the Internet, just as it was in broadcasting:

I expect societies will see intense competition ... in all categories of popular content – not just software and news, but also games, entertainment, sports programming, directories, classified advertising, and online communities devoted to major interests...

If people are to be expected to put up with turning on a computer to read a screen, they must be rewarded with deep and extremely up-to-date information that they can explore at will. They need to have audio, and possibly video. They need an opportunity for personal involvement that goes far beyond that offered through the letters-to-the-editor pages of print magazines...

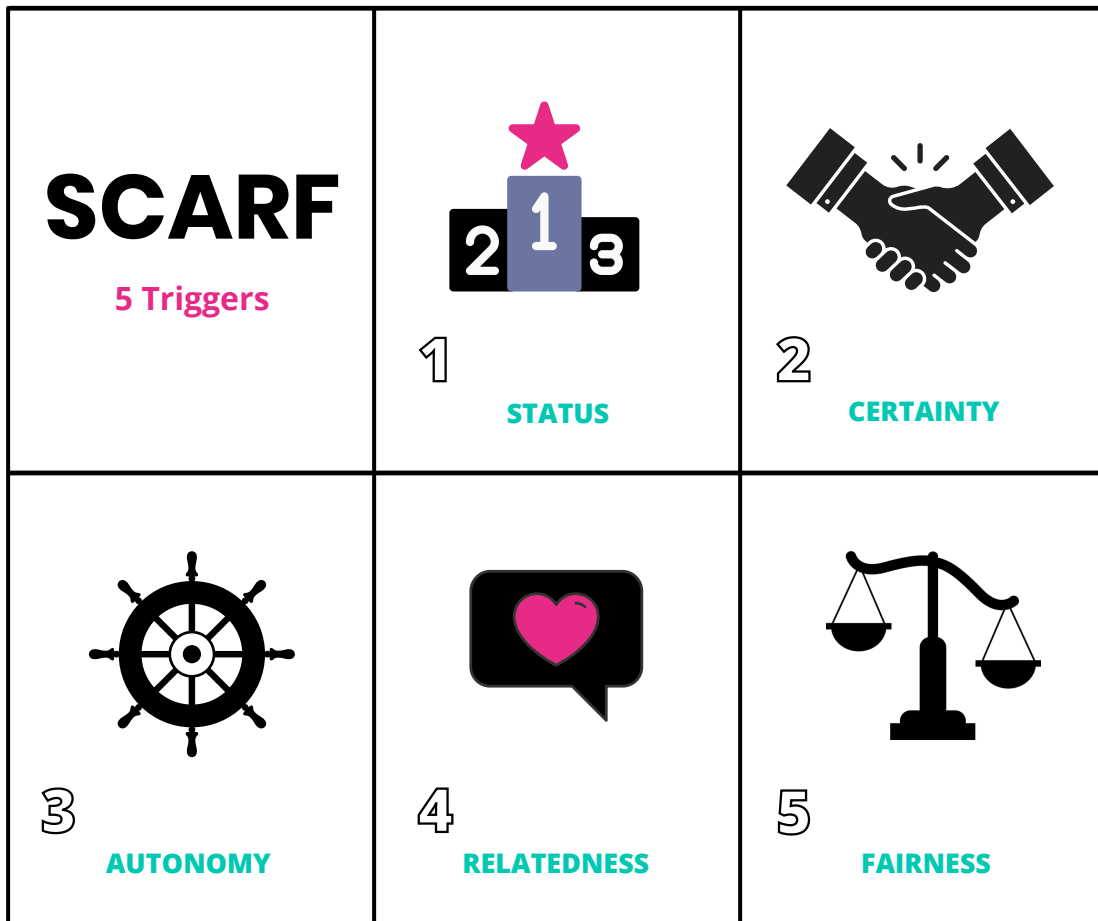
Those who succeed will propel the Internet forward as a marketplace of ideas, experiences, and products – a marketplace of content.

This Lab Report describes a strategy through which organizations can create effective content that wins in the marketplace of ideas. It’s also a lens through which organizations must understand the appeal of their competitors’ messaging and craft a compelling counter.

AUSTIN BERG,
IRON LIGHT CO-FOUNDER AND CMO

What is SCARF?

The SCARF model is an acronym for the five triggers of an approach or avoid (fight or flight) response in individuals: Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness (Rock, 2008). The most compelling content grabs attention and compels action with one or more components of SCARF.



1 STATUS



Status is all about our relative importance to others. Think about it like pecking order or seniority. If you perceive a status threat, similar neural networks are activated as a threat to your life. If you are left out of an activity, the same regions of your brain light up as if you were in physical pain. University College London Prof. Michael Marmot has argued with compelling research that even after controlling for education and income, social status is the most significant contributor to longevity and health.

USE CASE

Oftentimes in the public policy space, researchers are told numbers and white papers don't change minds. But one of the most prominent social movements in modern American history, Occupy Wall Street, was based on a figure. "We are the 99%" was the unifying slogan of the Occupy movement, and its brilliance lies in the fact that our brains use similar circuitry for thinking about status and processing numbers.

ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES

- Comparative statistics can be powerful status signifiers and are especially suited to state-based policy initiatives. Powerful stories on a given state may point out that it is home to the fastest-growing manufacturing sector in the region, the worst poverty rate in the country or the highest unemployment rate in 30 years.
- Union membership confers a sense of status to members, even in absence of any specific monetary benefit. A threat to a perceived reduction in status – for example, the Janus v. AFSCME case – generates a threat response.
- Admission to a private Facebook group after answering a series of questions generates a perception of increased status. If this group is then shown to have played a role in a victory of some kind, that sense of status and autonomy increases even further. Our sense of increased status can feel similar in strength to a material financial gain ([Izuma et al, 2008](#)).

2 CERTAINTY



Humans crave patterns, and pattern-recognition is key to our survival. Without it, we expend far too much energy to complete simple tasks. Even a trace amount of uncertainty can generate an “error” response in the orbital frontal cortex. And the brain fires off these error messages when someone is acting incongruously or untruthfully. Conversely, creating certainty and meeting expectations gives our brains a dopamine hit.

USE CASE

"In these uncertain times" wasn't just a COVID-19-era advertising meme – it was central to much of the political messaging in favor of continued lockdowns and school closings. Long after research had shown interaction outdoors and in schools was exceedingly safe, invoking even a trace level of uncertainty was enough to keep large swaths of parents from sending their children into classrooms and give cover to politicians closing playgrounds, beaches and parks.

ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES

- Lyndon Johnson’s “Daisy” campaign and George Bush’s Willie Horton ad spurred paradigm shifts in American political advertising. Both relied solely on generating uncertainty.
- Dire predictions of the consequences of climate change generate uncertainty, from Paul Erlich’s “The Population Bomb” to Greta Thurnberg’s “Our House is On Fire” speech.
- A meta-analysis of 127 independent studies found fear-based messages were twice as effective as messages without an appeal to fear in influencing attitudes, intentions, and behaviors (Tannenbaum et al, 2015)

3 AUTONOMY



Autonomy involves the sensation of having choices and wielding control over our environment. This sense of control is so important that it alone has been shown to correlate with improved health outcomes (Rodin 1986). In fact, simply viewing a given stressor as escapable, rather than unescapable, can have a major effect on our ability to function. (Donny et al, 2006).

USE CASE

A recent proposal from United States Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg to tax Americans by the number of miles they drive was quickly shelved after substantial blowback. A similar 2019 proposal in Illinois was not only tabled but wiped from the legislative record entirely after extraordinary backlash from the public, including the sponsoring legislator's own grandmother confronting him in the grocery store about the bill. Why? Researchers have long shown that car ownership is about much more than transportation, but a sense of independence, agency, autonomy and escape. It's no wonder that a proposal to install a government transponder in one's car that tracks and taxes each mile driven generates a strong threat response.

ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES

- “My body, my choice,” a slogan pioneered by the feminist movement, resonates across the political spectrum on a variety of seemingly disparate topics, including marijuana legalization, abortion and COVID-19 vaccination.
- Framing the Biden administration's goal to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in half by 2030 as necessitating a 90% reduction in red meat consumption sparked viral attention and outrage.
- Solutions journalism integrates reporting on social and political problems with actions readers can take to solve those problems. In absence of clear solutions to problems they see constantly in the news cycle, readers can become cynical and disengaged. Iron Light Labs will explore solutions journalism further in a future Lab report.
- Messaging of election integrity laws as taking away one's right to vote are extremely effective appeals to autonomy and fairness.

4 RELATEDNESS



Relatedness is all about deciding whether another person is a part of our tribe; friend or a foe; in-group or out-group. This is why picking the correct messenger to deliver your message is incredibly important – research shows that we process information coming from people we perceive as similar to us through similar circuitry used for thinking our own thoughts, and that this phenomenon does not happen with people we perceive as foes or competitors (Mather, 2006). Even discussing something innocuous like the weather can release oxytocin and increase our feelings of closeness and trust with another person (Zak et al, 2005). Storytelling is especially powerful in the domains of relatedness and fairness.

USE CASE

One of the most impressive uses of relatedness in storytelling and political messaging is "Tenemos Familias (We Have Families)" a short documentary produced by the Bernie Sanders campaign in 2016. Unlike traditional candidate advertising, Sanders does not appear until the third act, long after the viewer has formed a deep emotional connection with the main character's role as a worker and mother.

ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES

- Humans of New York has remained one of the most popular social media accounts in the world for more than a decade with simple portrait photography and longform quotes entirely in the subjects' own words.
- In its infancy, BuzzFeed generated enormous attention with niche content like "21 Things That Could Only Happen At Stanford," filled with inside jokes.
- Research on in-feed social ads found that content with an early story arc was 58% more likely to be viewed past 3 seconds, and the presence of people in the ad increased emotional intensity by 133%.
- Including the process of food preparation in a viral documentary on Chicago food cart entrepreneur Claudia Perez – and her struggle against unfair regulations – spurred extensive conversation in the Facebook comment section on the types of tamales Claudia was making and viewers' personal experiences with their favorite food carts. Customers from as far away as St. Louis traveled to taste Claudia's cuisine and food carts were soon legalized in the city.

5 FAIRNESS



Political dissidents across the world have risked their lives in righteous fights against unfairness and injustice. Unfair exchanges can activate a part of the brain called the insular cortex, which is involved in intense emotions such as disgust, and generate a strong threat response. Perhaps most notably, people who perceive others as acting unfairly not only fail to feel empathy for them if they are in pain, but can receive a reward response when the unfair actor is punished (Singer et al, 2006).

USE CASE

In a crime of desperation on behalf of her infant daughter, Lisa Creason attempted to rob a Subway sandwich shop when she was 19 years old. She served one year in prison for her crime. After leaving prison she turned her life around, started a nonprofit combatting violence in her community, raised three children on her own after her fiancée was killed by a stray bullet, and worked full-time as a nursing assistant. In order to provide a better life for her children, she enrolled in additional schooling to become a registered nurse with higher pay, and after years of work passed all of her classes with flying colors. She was then told by the state that she could not legally apply to become a registered nurse due to the crime she committed more than two decades earlier. Even the most ardent Blue Lives Matter supporter would find it difficult to argue that what Lisa experienced was fair. Her story inspired grassroots support across the political spectrum in her home state, including in the law enforcement community, and took the form of a 2017 bill signed by a Republican governor that opened up the field of nursing to tens of thousands of ex-offenders like her.

ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES

- Fairness and merit-based outcomes are closely connected. One example: Despite increasing calls for race-based reparations, critical race theory curriculum in schools and diversity, equity and inclusion mandates at all levels of government, a whopping 73% of Americans believe colleges and universities should not consider race or ethnicity when making decisions about student admissions. This majority opinion holds across all racial demographics as well as party affiliation.
- Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker's spent more than \$60 million on a "fair tax" ballot initiative campaign to change the state constitution to allow for a progressive income tax in Illinois. The "fair tax" idea initially polled with a +33 point margin, with nearly two-thirds of voters in favor. But penetration of a powerful message based around certainty – distrust of giving Illinois politicians new powers and the fact that the progressive tax opened the door for a new retirement tax – led to the proposal losing by 7 points in November 2020.
- Political hypocrisy and corruption are strong opportunities to message around fairness, with political officials violating the lockdown orders they themselves imposed and politically connected individuals jumping the line for vaccines being two recent examples.

Join the Discussion

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ABOUT



IRON LIGHT LABS

Iron Light Labs is an award-winning nonprofit focused on R&D for social impact. The nonprofit is called “Labs” because it experiments, innovates and tests to discover the best way to drive change. Iron Light Labs is building a future where storytellers leap out of their echo chambers, creators partner with effective messengers, changemakers experiment with emerging media, and everyone measures what matters.

ABOUT

Austin Berg

Austin Berg is a senior fellow at the nonprofit Iron Light Labs and is the co-founder and CMO of Iron Light, a change agency with social advocacy at its core.

As co-founder and CMO at Iron Light, Austin helps purpose-driven brands change the world. His writing and photojournalism work have been featured in The Economist, Washington Post, CBS This Morning and the Chicago Tribune. He is the winner of the Buckley Award from America’s Future Foundation and was honored as one of Illinois’ “20 In Their 20s” by Crain’s Chicago Business. He is the co-author of “The New Chicago Way: Lessons from Other Big Cities” for Southern Illinois University Press and wrote the documentary film, “Madigan: Power. Privilege. Politics.”