SC Civic Communications Project
June 25 - 26, 2026 Session Recap

Summary of presentations by Ann Seawright and Matt Sheheen from the Center for Public Interest Communications at University of Florida.

1. Strategic communications is not an act of self-expression: Strategic communication is never just an act of saying what *you* need or want to say about an issue or getting a message 'out'. It is a science-driven approach to achieve sustained, positive behavior change for the common good.

2. Ditch the Flawed 'Information Deficit Model': Public inaction is not simply caused by a lack of information. Raising awareness alone is insufficient; to drive true civic action, you must make people care and show them exactly how to help.

3. Master Strategy with the Four Questions: Plan your strategy effectively using the 'Back-of-the-Envelope' sequence. Systematically identify what you are trying to make happen, who must act, what they need to believe, and where their attention is right now.

4. Target Specific Actors, Not the 'General Public': There is no 'general public,' so we must speak directly to specific 'actors' who decide or influence outcomes. Identify them by name and explicitly evaluate your direct connections to them. You will get as specific as 'fans of the ___ football team' or 'three swing votes on City Council'

5. Map Your Strategy Across Six Spheres of Influence: Social change is shaped across six spheres: Policy, Media, Communities of Influence, The Market, Activism, and Social Norms. Use these spheres to identify where your resources can create the maximum leverage. Don't assume you should play in a particular sphere because that's where you're most experienced or comfortable.

6. Prioritize Psychographics Over Demographics: Successfully getting your message 'in' requires understanding your actors' inner psychological dimensions. Use persona mapping to trace their deeply held values, worldviews, and group identities. When doing so, you might find your selling point of "innovation" is unappealing to someone who values "tradition," as one example.

7. 'Talk in Pictures' to Defeat the Curse of Knowledge: Avoid assuming others naturally share your exact level of technical understanding. Protect credibility and maintain engagement by replacing abstract jargon with highly visual, concrete language. Your technical terms and research can end up alienating the actor you wish to act.

8. Activate 'Door-Opening' Emotions: Door-closing emotions like fear, sadness, or anger can cause people to freeze or disengage. Whenever feasible, deploy 'door-opening' emotions like pride, awe, humor, and hope to constructively connect with people's identities and drive action.

9. Ensure Your Calls to Action are Actionable: Your broad campaign goals and your immediate calls to action are entirely separate concepts. A great call to action specifies a participatory, achievable task that clearly illustrates how their specific action makes a difference.

10. Build Better Stories instead of Flat Bullet Points: Human brains organize reality through narratives, making data without a story potentially harmful. Build a complete story arc with structured plots—like a Quest or Rebirth—to transport your audience, reduce counter-arguing, and build deep trust.

Cheat sheet - Keep these concepts front of mind:

- **Stop raising awareness already!** - “Awareness” is not the same as ACTION.
- **“While cathartic,...”** (or funny or smart) - Something might feel good to say, but it might not move your action forward.
- **TBU - True But Unhelpful** - Does the fact or idea you want to share make your actors more likely to act? If not, keep it to yourself.