

SURVEILLANCE TOOLKIT: SAMPLE NARRATIVE & MESSAGING FRAMEWORK

A consistent communications strategy not only educates the public and decisionmakers, but also focuses your coalition and builds new political power. Articulate your values, the problem as you see it, and your solution. Use this narrative and your messages to inform how you talk about the Ordinance, whether you're writing a letter, making public comment, or holding an in-person meeting. The below sample messaging is from the campaign to pass San Francisco's historic legislation banning facial recognition and requiring oversight of surveillance technology.

Set out your core theme. This introduces the big idea and shows what you are fighting for. Start by writing a two or three sentence summary – this will be your topline messaging. Clearly frame the problem and how your solution will fix it. Think about what's at stake, and how each word you choose to use conveys the reason you're in this fight.

“Without public oversight of what surveillance technologies are introduced into our neighborhoods, invasive high-tech systems proliferate, jeopardizing our rights and our safety. Time and again, the harms of these technologies fall hardest on immigrants, activists, and people of color. The responsible and ethical answer is to create an open and inclusive process that prevents discriminatory surveillance and protects everyone.”

Describe your values. Connect to the audience and define the conversation in terms they care about. Remind your audience that surveillance is not synonymous with real safety.

“Surveillance without oversight makes us less safe and less free. Our communities deserve a seat at the table, and the power to create safeguards and prevent abuse.”

“All of us should feel at home in our own neighborhoods. That's why public safety in the digital era must include transparency and accountability. We can't allow technologies that let police track and control us run wild.”

“We shouldn't be test subjects for facial recognition, an invasive and dangerous technology that undermines our most fundamental civil liberties and freedoms.”

State the problem.

“Technologies like drones, social media surveillance, and facial recognition invade our private lives and create databases vulnerable to exploitation by the federal government.”

“Face surveillance has no place in this community. It gives police an unprecedented power to track and record who we are, where we go, and who we meet with.”

“The secret growth of ineffective, unaccountable, and discriminatory surveillance technologies is dangerous. It discourages activism, and can put people's lives and freedom at risk.”

Explain your solution. Demonstrate how the values of your audience are realized through engagement with your coalition.

“At the heart of this legislation is the basic principle that communities should know about and control what surveillance technology the police are using.”

“This legislation makes sure the right questions are asked and answered about surveillance technology from the beginning. It will help us make smart decisions that keep communities safe and their rights intact.”

“This ordinance will build trust and protect our rights by banning face recognition and bringing common sense oversight to surveillance in our city.”

Anticipate resistance. These are never easy conversations. Think about what is making people hesitate, or what arguments your opponents will use. Anticipating opposing views can help you overcome them.

“Real public safety requires communication, trust, and accountability. Decisions about surveillance technology should be made by community members acting through the democratic process, not by police or surveillance vendors behind closed doors.”

“Surveillance technologies that are bought and used in secret create systems that further fuel racist police violence, push people into the hands of ICE, and distract public resources that should be used to keep us healthy and safe.”

“It’s unacceptable for police to hide their practices from the public. When surveillance is forced into the light, communities have the power to call out racist policing practices and stop discriminatory surveillance in its tracks.”

Call to action. This helps clarify the ask for your audience and members of the coalition.

“Our City is at the forefront of civic innovation. By passing this law, the city’s elected leaders can redefine what tech leadership means.”

“This ordinance will put decisions about surveillance back where they belong: in the hands of the people. Come out to tonight’s public meeting and voice your support!”

With a shared narrative and messages in hand, your coalition is ready to start the next steps of your public advocacy.