

Communicating about Arts Controversies

Information provided by the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies

“Acts of creative expression help define community life; reactions to creative expression are equally defining and consequential.”

— *Not Here, Not Now, Not That! Protest over Art and Culture in America*, by Steven J. Tepper

The arts and culture possess a unique power to inspire, educate and unite diverse people around common interests. But art also can be a lightning rod, with the potential to challenge our assumptions, surface difficult issues or provoke community conflict.

Such controversies aren't everyday occurrences. But when they happen, they present special challenges and responsibilities for arts leaders. This expanded edition of *The Practical Advocate* helps cultural advocates address arts controversies and promote constructive dialogue about the arts in community life.

Controversy versus Crisis

Americans are opinionated! Artworks in the public sphere are subject to public debate and multiple interpretations. Differences of interpretation do not, by themselves, constitute a controversy. A **controversy** occurs *when intense reactions converge into strongly held and collectively voiced objections*. Such flash points have occurred in instances where:

- community members become polarized in their reactions to artworks that tackle challenging social issues;
- parents question whether arts programs occurring in schools or libraries are in violation of state "divisive concepts" laws;
- elected officials express concern over the merits of particular arts projects;
- or arts grants are featured in "wasteful government spending" reports produced by political organizations.

Most controversies are uncomfortable, but not all qualify as crises. **Crises** involve an additional chain reaction:

- Communications about the event become rapid, incendiary and chaotic.
- Community members become politically polarized on the issue, which becomes a symbol for larger community tensions.
- Arts organizations, artists, educators or other individuals involved in the project experience harassment.
- The resources and reputations of the organizations and agencies involved are put at risk.

Before a Controversy Erupts

Strategic communication choices today can help you mitigate a potential controversy tomorrow.

- **Communicate Proactively about the Value and Impact of the Arts.** Push out a continual stream of information and stories illuminating how people benefit from the arts. The first reason to do this is transparency. Beyond that, proactive communication builds credibility for the arts and establishes a broader context in which to interpret individual cases of controversy. NASAA's [Arts and Creativity Strengthen Our Nation: A Narrative and Message Guide](#) offers evidence based strategies.
- **Establish Monitoring Systems.** The earlier you can learn about an emerging situation, the more options you have for addressing it. Keep your finger on the pulse of community conversations about the arts and other kinds of community controversies, to reduce the chances of being taken by surprise.
- **Draft a Crisis Communications Plan.** Follow the steps outlined to prepare for a potential controversy. While you're at it, consider your preparedness for communicating during other emergencies such as natural disasters or public safety crises.

Crisis Readiness

1. **Identify Possible Crisis Scenarios**
What types of controversies could arise? How could they be damaging? Consider potential vulnerabilities. Be even-handed in this assessment. Crises can originate from any point on the political spectrum.
2. **Establish a Crisis Advisors Team**
Whose advice will you need in a pinch? Establish a small, agile team of people to help you respond to crises. The team should be knowledgeable about your work, possess political acumen and be able to maintain confidentiality.
3. **Rehearse the Scenarios**
What would you do? Who would you consult or notify? What would you say if criticized? Sketch an action plan and draft messages for your most likely scenarios. Each crisis is unique, so you'll have to adjust these drafts. But developing models in advance (not under duress) will improve the speed and quality of your response in an emergency.
4. **Train Spokespeople**
Only authorized spokespeople should speak to the media or elected officials. Make sure everyone likely to play this role has the skills and information they need to serve your organization well.



Jaume Plensa, "I, you, she or he..." (2006) at the Frederik Meijer Gardens and Sculpture Park in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The figures, comprised of stainless steel letters, are meant to represent a form of ongoing, silent conversation. Image source: Wikimedia Commons.

When a Controversy Strikes

In today's media environment, events—and misinformation-- can gain momentum very quickly. It's important to act swiftly to stay ahead of that wave. ¹

- 1. Assemble the facts quickly.** What is the nature of the artwork or event? Who is upset about it and why? If you are a funder, did you provide grant dollars to the arts organization or specific project that is under fire? In what amount? What were the processes and criteria used to adjudicate the award(s)?
- 2. Ramp up your media scanning.** You need real-time notification about everything said regarding the controversy and about your organization via traditional and social media.
- 3. Assess the magnitude of the event.** Brief your crisis advisors. They may be able to help you differentiate criticism (bound to emerge in communities where diverse people hold many opinions) from actual crises.
- 4. Determine whether your organization can or should weigh in.** If you did not fund the project in question, wading into a local controversy might do more harm than good.
- 5. Formulate your messages.** Develop succinct talking points and a prepared statement for use with authorizers (supervisors, board members, civic leaders and elected officials) and the media. Even if you issue no public statements, these talking points will inform how you answer questions.
- 6. Activate spokespeople.** Make sure everyone in your organization knows to route all inquiries to your designated spokespeople. Identify credible proxies (individuals outside of your organization) who can knowledgeably speak to the issues. Equip all spokespeople with the facts and your key messages.
- 7. Propagate your messages.** Promote your position strategically. Should key authorizers or government officials be briefed? Is it appropriate to issue a public statement? Do social media channels or news articles warrant a response? Could an op ed from an influential arts champion be helpful? Engaging with media can be a double-edged sword, but seasoned crisis communications professionals often underscore the advantages of proactivity. "The media wants to tell a good story with victims, villains, and visuals.... Tell your side of the story most efficiently and most eloquently through the media, or someone else will do it for you." ²
- 8. Adapt on the fly.** If your controversy morphs into a crisis, your best-laid plans may need to adjust to an increasingly unpredictable chain of events.

As the situation unfolds, guard against rash actions—by individuals on either side of the debate—that could inflame the issue or further polarize positions. "When the you-know-what hits the fan, the first rule of crisis management is to turn off the fan. Don't fuel the fire."³

Six Principles

The arts can learn from other sectors. Research by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention informed a comprehensive Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) manual that combines crisis communication techniques and risk mitigation advice. CERC principles are useful for arts leaders:

1. **Be first.** The first source of communication often becomes the source against which all others are measured.
2. **Be right.** Accuracy is critical to credibility.
3. **Be credible.** Honesty is fundamental to maintaining trust.
4. **Express empathy.** Feelings cannot be countered with facts. People must first know that their leaders care.
5. **Promote action.** Giving people something specific to do channels energy and restores a sense of control.
6. **Show respect.** Lack of respect for injured or aggrieved parties undermines trust.

Politics and Civil Discourse

Arts controversies can become politically polarizing— regardless of whether the artwork was ever intended as political commentary. In these cases, it is the job of arts leaders and cultural advocates to navigate the situation sensitively and strategically, while setting the tone for civil dialogue.

“When the you-know-what hits the fan, the first rule of crisis management is to turn off the fan.”

--Paul A. Argenti, Harvard Business Review

Freedom of Expression and Community Engagement

For guidance on effective community engagement strategies, see:

- [Community Engagement](#), Indiana Arts Commission
- [Facilitated Dialogue and Controversial Issues](#), National Park Service
- [Inroads: The Intersection of Art & Civic Dialogue](#), Community Arts Network archive
- [Talking across the Political Divide](#), Braver Angels
- [Darby Community Library case study](#), American Libraries

Keep It Local

National organizations can be valuable sources of information, advice and case studies. Avail yourself of those resources, but be cautious about inviting the involvement of national organizations in local affairs. Case studies of arts controversies have shown that outside interests can alter the tenor of a controversy, ratcheting up conflict and eclipsing the interests of the local community. Satisfactory resolution of civic issues is best attained by local stakeholders.

And the Beat Goes On

Public relations professionals stress the importance of continual learning to improve practice. After a crisis, conduct a debrief to take stock of what worked well and what you need to improve in the future. Thank those who spoke out in support of the arts, and double down on your efforts to propagate positive stories about the impact of the arts. Arts controversies don't always have tidy endings—expect ongoing ripple effects in the community, in the media and among arts constituents. Remember that controversial arts projects constitute a small fraction of the creative activities taking place every day, in communities large and small, across the nation. Make sure those stories get told, too.



“Amplifier,” a mural featuring a portrait of artist Dave Loewenstein’s mother in Lucas, Kansas, encourages people to add their own voice to public conversations. Image © D. Loewenstein 2023

Notes

¹ [The 10 Biggest Mistakes in Crisis Communications](#), Jonathan Bernstein, Bernstein Crisis Management, 2016; [Crisis Communications: Managing Corporate Reputation in the Court of Public Opinion](#), David Weiner, Ivey Business Journal, March/April 2006.

² [The Crisis Communications Playbook: What GM’s Mary Barra \(and Every Leader\) Needs to Know](#), Paul A. Argenti, *Harvard Business Review*, March 2014.

³ [13 Golden Rules of PR Crisis Management](#), Forbes Agency Council, *Forbes*, June 20, 2017.

⁶ [Freedom of Expression at the National Endowment for the Arts](#), Commission on College and University Legal Studies/ California State University, July 4, 2005; [Public Funding/Public Art](#), National Coalition against Censorship/Center for Democracy and Technology, accessed February 2023.

⁷ [Public Art Controversy: Cultural Expression and Civic Debate](#), Erika Doss, Americans for the Arts, pp. 6-10; Tepper, pp. 50-56, 279.

Recommended Resources

[Crisis Communications Planning](#)

This chapter from the Oklahoma Arts Council's Nonprofit Arts Development Guide outlines step-by-step planning tips and dos and don'ts for spokespeople.

[Tips for Communicating Controversial Issues](#)

The Ohio State University offers wise advice in a readily digestible format.

[Not Here, Not Now, Not That! Protest over Art and Culture in America](#)

Steven J. Tepper mines lessons learned from 1990s arts controversies in diverse communities. An epilogue on "A 21st Century Approach to Arts Conflict" suggests eight ways the arts community can integrate free expression and social responsibility.

[Meeting Ethical and Reputational Challenges](#)

Developed by the Arts Council of England, this guide states: "In an increasingly complex world, the more that can be done to approach contention with courage and a zest for debate, the healthier our cultural and civic life. This guidance has been compiled to encourage bold, yet measured decision-making."

Arts leaders also should familiarize themselves with the positions of the National Coalition Against Censorship and the American Library Association. See their [Guidelines for State Arts Agencies, Museums, University Galleries and Performance Spaces](#), [Museum Best Practices for Managing Controversy](#) and the [Unite against Book Bans Action Toolkit](#).

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