

## 2 Words Evoke a Powerful Story

***In debates over ways to reduce highway traffic, facts fade and emotions emerge when talk turns to "Lexus Lanes".***

Highway traffic is a problem we can all agree on...up to a point. Nobody likes sitting in it, everybody wants something done about it, but exactly *how* we solve this problem is often a matter of heated debate. And like a jack-knifed tractor-trailer sprawled across the road at rush hour, some of the language in this debate is snarling the discussion and bringing progress to a screeching halt.

For a while, many transportation experts thought that carpool lanes would end the debates. Fast moving high-occupancy vehicle (or HOV) lanes, as they are officially known, were supposed to encourage more drivers to team up, ultimately decreasing the overall number of cars on heavily traveled highways. According to a [study](#) published by Resources for the Future, however, as HOV lanes became increasingly common around the US between 1980 and 2000, carpooling actually *decreased* from 19.7% of highway commuters to 12.6%.



By the mid-1990s, several states started converting HOV lanes back to general use, so Robert Poole offered a new idea. As director of transportation policy for the Reason Foundation, Poole developed the concept for high-occupancy *toll* (or HOT) lanes. Under Poole's model, solo drivers could pay a fee for using the carpool lane, and that fee would fluctuate throughout the day to follow the rise and fall of traffic.

In theory, HOT lanes would have three benefits: (1) carpool lanes, which were widely underused, would carry a larger share of traffic; (2) the remaining lanes would have fewer cars, allowing average speeds to increase, and (3) revenue generated by "dynamic

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The lesson of "Lexus Lanes"

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***free-range thinking*** is written by Andy Goodman and edited by Celia Hoffman. To read back issues, download free publications, and to learn more about our work, please visit [www.thegoodmancenter.com](http://www.thegoodmancenter.com).

congestion tolling" (the user-unfriendly jargon for this system) would fund mass transit programs in a further attempt to reduce traffic.

In fact, these benefits have been realized in several states. The Florida Department of Transportation estimated that rush hour traffic moved 2-3 times faster when HOT lanes were introduced. In Washington State, HOT lanes generated \$737,000 in gross revenue between 2008-2010. Despite this and similar evidence, fierce opposition to HOT lanes has persisted, and much of it has been fueled by two words first uttered by Heidi Stamm nearly twenty years ago.

A citizen advocate based in Seattle, Stamm believed that HOT lanes placed an unfair financial burden on the average commuter. While the theoretical benefits sounded good, Stamm argued, only rich people would be able to afford HOT lanes on a regular basis. Testifying against this proposed system in 1995, Stamm used the words "Lexus lanes," and the alliterative label stuck.



Search "Lexus lanes" on the web, and you'll find the term showing up in dozens of headlines from 1995 right up to today. (In fact, a recent headline from The Los Angeles Times pictured here was the inspiration for this story.) There's just one problem with this catchy

coinage: it's not true.

Separate studies in Georgia and Washington State analyzed the makes and models of cars using HOT lanes on local highways. Honda Civics, Toyota Camrys, Ford-150s and similar economy cars and trucks were recorded in far greater numbers than Lexuses, BMWs, and other luxury models.

Which begs the question: why does a term first used in the mid-1990s and never supported by hard evidence still play a featured role in today's debate? Sure, a little alliteration can go a long way, but not far enough to account for the remarkable persistence of "Lexus lanes." Instead, I would submit that the words tap into a master narrative lurking on the dark side of the American Dream. It's the story with the moral, "The system is rigged for rich people."

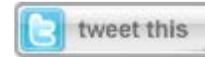
And there's no shortage of evidence supporting *this* story. Whether it's bankers getting bailed out, or troubled scions of wealthy families avoiding jail, barely a news cycle goes by without some reminder that in America, it pays to be rich. So when we hear that rich people can now buy their way out traffic, we're predisposed to agree and shake our fists - even if it's not true.

So, what is the ultimate lesson of "Lexus lanes"? In battles for public support, message-meisters will weave words that obscure the truth ("death tax"), that tap into our fears ("Lexus lanes"), as well as words that speak to our better angels ("marriage equality"). But always remember that what makes the words powerful are the stories they evoke. Stories are what drive people to action, no matter what lane they take.

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*Storytelling: Tapping the Power of Narrative* is a four-hour webinar designed to help you tell more compelling stories about your organization's work. Each class runs one hour, and over four weeks we will cover:

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When I first started attending webinars, I was probably just as bored as you. But as the host/teacher droned on, I started to notice a few things. Having worked in talk radio earlier in my career, I started to see distinct similarities between the webinar format and a talk radio show.

Later on, as I began developing webinars to teach at The Goodman Center, I incorporated some of the principles that have been proven to make talk radio engaging. As a result, our webinars receive consistently high marks, and good causes that frequently conduct webinars of their own have asked me to teach these techniques to them.

We've condensed those lessons into a one-hour class open to the public. In "The Webinar on Webinars," you'll learn:

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