



# free-range THINKING™

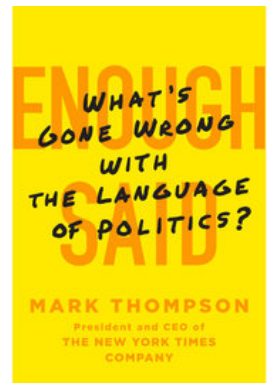
free-range thinking™ is a monthly journal of best practices, resources and generally useful stuff for public interest communicators who want to reach more people with more impact



## How Did We Get Here? (Mark Thompson Can Explain)

What has happened to political discourse in our country? It feels like everyone's yelling, nobody's listening, and - unsurprisingly - nothing gets done. So who's to blame? Is it the politicians who willfully ignore inconvenient truths? The trolls of the Twitterverse who turn every debate into blood sport? Journalists who make sure all voices are heard even when some are spouting fact-free nonsense? And is all of this toxic blather the ill wind at Donald Trump's back, or is he the biggest windbag behind the storm?

These are the questions that Mark Thompson tackles in his essential new book, "Enough Said: What's Gone Wrong with the Language of Politics?" As CEO of Channel 4, Director-General of the BBC, and now President and CEO of The New York Times Company, Thompson has had a ringside seat to the steady beat-down of political discourse around the world. In his book, he analyzes the rhetoric of world leaders such as Berlusconi, Blair and Putin, as well as American presidents and presidential wannabes. More importantly, Thompson shows how the deterioration of political discourse has shaped world events, from the unexpected embrace of Brexit in England to continuing inaction on climate change in America.



What follows are some of the key takeaways from Thompson's book, but my #1 takeaway is this: if you work in public interest communications, you have to understand the changing climate in which your messages are circulating. "Enough Said" is the most incisive analysis of that climate that I've seen in a long time. [Full story](#). *Please note: Apple Mail users may need to scroll down manually.*

## Who Told It Best? Find Out December 15th

If there's one question we hear more than any other during our storytelling workshops and webinars, it's this: "Who does it best?" My default answer, which never fails to disappoint, is "It depends." There are so many different kinds of stories to tell and so many different ways to tell them that it's impossible to give a concise answer. But since this question has arisen so consistently over the years, we finally decided to spend a few months scouring the web to identify some of the best storytellers in the public interest community.

On December 15th (11a-12n PT/2-3p ET) we will offer a one-hour webinar showcasing exemplars in five categories: Best Core Stories, Best Visual Storytelling, Best Audio Storytelling, Best at Collecting Stories and Best Overall. Please join us for an informative and inspiring hour - tuition is \$49.50 per person and group discounts are available. Grab your seat [here](#).



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### The whole problem is exemplified by two words: "death panels."

In August 2009, Sarah Palin posted her objections to Obamacare on Facebook. She claimed that a provision in the draft bill would ultimately allow the government to set up "death panels" that would decide if people were "worthy of medical care." In fact, the provision she cited (Section 1233) was about end-of-life *counseling* that would be strictly *voluntary*, and its primary intent was to make this counseling eligible for coverage under Medicare.



Sarah Palin

As Thompson points out, however, facts are no match for a good piece of political rhetoric, and "death panels" was a very good piece indeed. "A powerful political point that can be expressed in two words is perfect for the world of Twitter," says Thompson. Little wonder that within a few weeks of Palin creating the term, 86% of Americans had heard it and 30% believed it was real (including 47% of Republicans).

The term is also representative of the scorched earth style of political argument that is starting to dominate our most important conversations. "What Sarah Palin claims to be uncovering is nothing less than a conspiracy to murder," says Thompson. "There is no presumption of good faith on the part of your opponent - this is a fight to the political death...."

Even though death panels were a myth and were widely debunked, the term did its job: the provision was dropped from the bill. And even worse, an outrageous lie cleverly compressed into two words provided a model for others to emulate. ("Clean coal" anyone?)

### We're caring more about who's speaking than what they're saying.

In his "Art of Rhetoric," Aristotle said that persuasive speech consisted of three parts in equal measure: *logos* (pure argument), *ethos* (the speaker's character and standing), and *pathos* (the speaker's ability to connect to the audience's concerns). Observing the rise of Donald Trump and others like him around the globe, Thompson expresses deep concern over the phenomenon of "authenticism," which he defines as "the single-minded belief that all that really matters in public language is the speaker's supposed authenticity."

"When trust in politicians is low," Thompson adds, "perceived authenticity can be more important for some citizens than anything else - policies, ideological affiliation, even character flaws that in other circumstances would put them off entirely." For Trump in particular, this is a reasonable explanation why his outrageous statements and behavior do not turn off his supporters: it's just Trump being Trump, they say, so nothing else really matters.

**Discrediting science is a problem that could get even worse.**

"For evidence that our public language is heading into crisis," Thompson writes in Chapter 9, "we need look no farther than the climate change debate. Science is meant to be the decider, a species of knowledge that stands above the fray and whose pronouncements should be listened to and acted upon without delay."

Sadly, deliberate efforts by energy companies to create public uncertainty around climate change combined with the complicity of GOP leaders has stalled significant action at the federal level. "And if the authority of science no longer carries the day," Thompson warns, "then why should we accept any other branch of specialist knowledge?"

**Political discourse may be dying, but it's not dead yet.**

Thompson remains hopeful that we can still revive public discourse and have healthy debates on the issues of the day. He expresses appreciation for the work of political satirists, from Jon Stewart to Charlie Hebdo, saying "Satirists have always been the public language's street sweepers, brushing away bogus rhetoric in all its forms - the false, the fawning, the idiotic."



Jon Stewart

Ultimately, though, he puts the task of protecting political language in all our hands. "We need to teach our children how to parse every kind of public language, from marketing-speak to the loftiest political utterances on TV and radio, the Web and social media." If we fail to do this, Thompson warns, the consequences may be dire. "The near-universal trashing of the regular language of politics creates perfect conditions for the true demagogue."

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*Upcoming online classes at The Goodman Center*

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**Strategic Communications: Cutting Through the Clutter**

November 10 & 11  
11am - 12pm PT

RUN BETTER WEBINARS

**The Webinar on Webinars**

December 12  
11am - 12pm PT

TELL BETTER STORIES

**Storytelling: Tapping the Power of Narrative**

January 5, 12, 19 & 26  
9am - 10am PT

**About Us**

*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).

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