

"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*  
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 government arts agencies and 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:

- a theatre production satirizes a prominent elected official;
- a sculpture installation memorializes a community's painful history of subjugation;
- a prominent poet publishes a new work critical of the government;
- a photography exhibition includes iconoclastic images that offend religious leaders;
- an arts festival is mischaracterized in a "wasteful government spending" report produced by a political organization.

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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.
- Arts organizations or artists are subject to harassment.
- Funding streams—or the credibility of funders—are put at risk.

## BEFORE A CONTROVERSY ERUPTS

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

- **Build your reputation as a trusted source of facts and expertise.** The media, the arts community and public officials should view you as a reliable authority on issues pertaining to the arts and cultural policy. Establish a track record of being responsive and providing accurate information.
- **Establish monitoring systems.** Keep your fingers on the pulse of community conversations about the arts to reduce the chances of being taken by surprise. Periodically review grantee/constituent event calendars, put a social media monitoring system in place, and set up automated news alerts to notify you when the arts or your agency/organization are mentioned.
- **Establish a factual narrative about the impact of the arts.** Use your own communications outlets—and cultivate media contacts—to push out a continual stream of stories illuminating how people in your state benefit from the arts. The first reason to do this is transparency: the public deserves to know the results of tax dollars spent on the arts. Beyond that, proactive communication lays a strong foundation, giving everyone a broader context in which to interpret individual cases of controversy.

## CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS READINESS

### 1. 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.

### 2. Identify Possible Crisis Scenarios

What types of controversies could arise? How could they be damaging? Convene your team to identify potential vulnerabilities and worst-case scenarios. Be brutally honest in this assessment.

### 3. Rehearse the Scenarios

What would you do? What would you say? 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 a genuine emergency.

### 4. Train Spokespeople

Only authorized spokespeople should speak to the media. Make sure everyone likely to play this role has the training and skills they need to serve your organization well.

### 5. Compile Key Contacts

Consolidate contact information for your board or council leaders, key staff, government officials that oversee your work, and media outlets with an interest in the arts or legislative affairs. Keep this information handy to save time in a crunch.

- **Draft a crisis communications plan.** Follow the steps outlined above 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. [ArtsReady](#) resources can help.

## WHEN A CONTROVERSY STRIKES

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

1. **Assemble the facts fast.** 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 criteria used to adjudicate your award(s)?
2. **Target 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.** Activate and brief your crisis advisors. Differentiate criticism (which does not necessarily warrant a response) from wider protest, which may warrant action. Consider the severity and number of complaints and the channels of influence involved. Weigh the possible consequences—perceptual and political—of the controversy, but don't get bogged down by trying to anticipate every single scenario.
4. **Determine whether your organization can or should weigh in on the controversy.** If you did not fund the project in question, wading into a local controversy might do more harm than good. But if you did invest in a project at the center of a controversy, you likely have an obligation to inform public understanding of the issue. Will you need anyone's permission (such as a government official or a board chair) before you act? If so, swiftly recommend a course of action—and a rationale for it—to this authority.
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.
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.** Reach out to key media contacts and offer to serve as a knowledgeable resource. Use social and traditional media to drive the parts of the story that pertain to your agency or organization's funding relationships and the rationale for the public investment. "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." <sup>2</sup>

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## 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.** Emotion 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 a community affected by a crisis undermines trust.

[Leading in Times of Trauma](#), published by Harvard Business Review, offers additional guidance for leaders of communities facing crises.

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.

Check in periodically with the organization presenting the controversial work. Make sure you both are operating with the same fact base. You need to learn how the organization is handling the issue, and the organization needs to understand how it affects the larger arts field. Funders and advocates don't have jurisdiction over a grantee's public relations choices. But you can and should seek a collegial consultation that equips all parties with the information needed to manage public discussion constructively.

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."<sup>3</sup>

## POLITICS AND CIVIL DISCOURSE

Arts controversies can become politically polarizing—whether or not the artwork was intended as political commentary. In these cases, it is the job of arts leaders and cultural advocates to set the tone for civil dialogue.

A healthy democracy can and should debate the meanings of art and the role that culture plays in community life. Civil discourse honors multiple viewpoints, debates issues on their substantive merits, and moves "beyond sound bites, indignation and accusation."<sup>4</sup> Public arts agencies and arts advocates must lead by example. Artists, citizens and elected officials all must experience arts agencies and cultural advocates as responsive, objective good listeners. Arts professionals also can make a commitment to "include and incorporate the voice of critics—no matter how cantankerous or challenging—in the process of creating, curating and presenting our shared, but not necessarily agreed-upon, cultural life."<sup>5</sup>

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**Simultaneously, arts agencies and advocates must be crystal clear that public-sector arts grant making is not politically motivated.** In fact, great care is taken to keep politics *out* of funding decisions by basing awards on criteria such as grantees' community engagement practices, educational programs, artistic excellence and sound management. Funding recommendations are citizen driven, with applications reviewed by panelists representing diverse backgrounds, geographies and areas of expertise.

Objective grant adjudication practices exist for many reasons, one of which is to prevent interference in free speech. Nobody—on either side of the political spectrum—wants government to decide what artists or any other citizens are allowed to express. To do so would go against the first principles upon which America was founded.

## FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND COMMUNITY RESPONSIVENESS

The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution prohibits government from curtailing freedom of expression. That deeply held principle applies to both sides of arts controversies: artists have the right to express their artistic visions, and community members have the right to express their objections.

**Most state arts agencies have authorizing statutes and governing policies that explicitly encourage freedom of artistic expression.** A government arts funder typically cannot control a grantee's work or withdraw support only because some people find the content to be disturbing.<sup>6</sup> **At the same time, public agencies have a responsibility to uphold the public trust and foster productive community conversations about the arts.** To this end, public funders may:

- require grantees to adopt meaningful community engagement practices and involve local citizens in their planning and programming;
- set a tone for civil dialogue that allows all points of view (from artists and the broader community) to be heard and respected;
- promote best practices in using the arts to address sensitive issues. This includes providing appropriate context for audiences encountering provocative works.

For guidance on effective community engagement strategies, see:

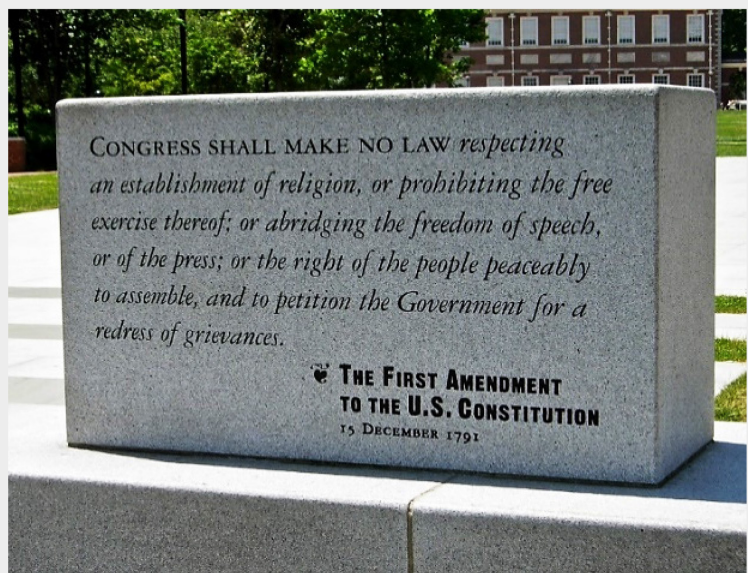
[Planning & Designing Arts-Based Civic Engagement Projects](#), by Animating Democracy/Americans for the Arts

[Inroads: The Intersection of Art & Civic Dialogue](#), from the Community Arts Network archive

[Interpretive Facilitator's Toolkit](#), by the National Park Service

[Including Marginalized Voices and Addressing Controversial Topics](#), from the American Association for State and Local History

[5 Tips for Civic Dialogue in an Online World](#), by Facing History and Ourselves



## 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 direct involvement of national organizations in local affairs. Case studies of arts controversies<sup>7</sup> have shown that interference by 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 who understand a community's unique history and needs.

## 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 went 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.

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

### [Crisis Communications Planning](#)

This chapter from the Oklahoma Arts Council's Nonprofit Development Guide outlines step-by-step planning tips and do's 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 805 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 is relevant to America. "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. See its [Guidelines for State Arts Agencies, Museums, University Galleries and Performance Spaces](#) and [Museum Best Practices for Managing Controversy](#).

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

<sup>2</sup> [The Crisis Communications Playbook: What GM's Mary Barra \(and Every Leader\) Needs to Know](#), Harvard Business Review, March 2014.

<sup>3</sup> [13 Golden Rules of PR Crisis Management](#), Forbes, June 20, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> [Not Here, Not Now, Not That! Protests over Art and Culture in America](#), Steven J. Tepper, University of Chicago Press, 2011, p. 276.

<sup>5</sup> Tepper, p. 275.

<sup>6</sup> [Public Funding of Controversial Art](#), Newseum Institute First Amendment Center, June 2006; [Freedom of Expression at the National Endowment for the Arts](#), Commission on College and University Legal Studies / California State University, July 4, 2005.

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