

rethink

Media for Security, Rights, and Democracy

2024 YEAR IN REVIEW



LETTER FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR & BOARD CHAIR



Mark Reading-Smith
Executive Director



Tyler Lewis
Board Chair

For ReThink Media, 2024 was full of big transitions.

We have completed the transition to our first-ever new Executive Director, we voted in a new board chair, and we have added four new board members. The result is new energy, new ideas, and a shared determination to strengthen the work that ReThink has successfully done for 17 years.

Sadly, like many nonprofits, we were also forced to eliminate multiple positions in February due to a multi-year budget deficit that was no longer sustainable. These layoffs were a first for ReThink, and a measure we never aim to repeat; however, the financial realities brought into sharp focus the need to strengthen our model, funding, and impact. While smaller, we can become stronger. To their great credit, our colleagues share our unwavering determination to ensure that ReThink's best work remains ahead.

During a year that has witnessed continuing war in Ukraine and genocidal violence in Gaza, this resolve has been critical. We have deepened our peace-building work through sustained communications leadership, resources, and support in critically underfunded and overlooked areas of advocacy, including: US military spending, arms sales, and the desperate need for a permanent ceasefire between Hamas and Israel. This has occurred in conjunction with our longstanding work in the nuclear disarmament field, where the multi-faceted threats involving nuclear weapons are as present and plausible as they have been in a generation.

Domestically, our work remains grounded in supporting grassroots organizations working on judicial integrity, money and politics reform, and voting rights. The vital communications work to serve these under-resourced organizations often represents the first and last line of defense in protecting our courts, elections, and rights to participate in democracy. This was true before November, and now should be deemed essential. This also rings true for our other core area of work: supporting Black, African, Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim, Sikh, and South Asian communities, who continue to confront bias, bigotry, and discrimination in ways that have only intensified in the wake of October 7, 2023.

Next year, we will see MAGA extremists return to power. This time, they are better prepared and less restrained. The agenda for this next administration is clear, and the impact will have dramatic and probably deadly consequences for nearly every facet of ReThink's work.

150+

organizations who received communications support

500+

advocates

55+

organizations given affordable access to media database tools

25+

trainings, workshops and convenings

16

research and analysis projects

As we all prepare for the daunting road ahead, we are proudly reflecting on the critical work we have led over the last year. We have strengthened advocacy campaigns across multiple states while providing critical media support on federal legislation. We provided seminal media, polling, and messaging analysis across multiple issue areas that helped refine (and, at times, define) tactics and strategy. We provided tailored media and communications trainings to hundreds of advocates and activists across the country and brought new digital communications capacity to our partners in the field.

This report is not intended to be a detailed overview of every ReThink achievement in 2024; rather, it's a compilation of highlights that speak to the importance of our mission and the potential for doing more to strengthen that impact in 2025 and beyond.

While 2024 was an enormous year of transition and challenge for ReThink, make no mistake that our organization starts this year in a better place. We continue to confront a budget deficit, but it's the smallest deficit we've had in years. We have critical fundraising work to do, but we are pleased to share that we have secured new funding from two new foundations to begin the year. These important steps are only the beginning of what is ahead! For the first time in our organizational history, the staff and board are working on a comprehensive multi-year strategic plan that will be completed this year. We are confident that the results of this plan will produce a ReThink Media that is a stronger partner to lead on the enormous communications challenges that lie ahead. To learn more about the future of ReThink, read *New Year, New Opportunities* at the end of the report.

We'd like to end by thanking the exceptional ReThink staff, who remain the heart and soul of everything we do. Their steadfast commitment to the issues we work on is combined with an unwavering understanding that, when we are at our best, we remain behind-the-scenes doing the communications work that nobody else has the skills or capacity to do. When we are successful, it's our partners who shine! We are deeply grateful for our team's commitment, brilliance, and stamina to do more with less; every success we had in 2024 was driven by their talent. We can't wait to see the incredible contributions they will make moving forward.

Mark Reading-Smith

MARK READING-SMITH, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Tyler Lewis

TYLER LEWIS, BOARD CHAIR

On behalf of the staff and board, we also want to express our deep appreciation for all of our philanthropic partners, who generously provide the resources needed to uplift our work. As some of our supporters prefer to remain anonymous, we want to honor their wishes and haven't included a list of our 2024 funders. ReThink deeply values the support of philanthropic partners and our achievements would not be possible without your support.

FROM INSIGHTS TO IMPACT

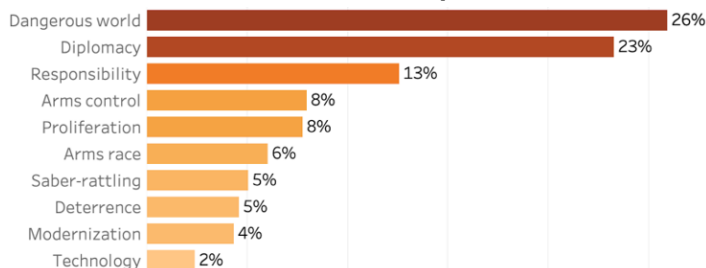
Exploring Data-Driven Strategies to Stop Irresponsible US Media Narratives on China and Nuclear Security

Many arms control and disarmament advocates have been concerned about the implications of growing tensions between the US and China, including a new nuclear arms race, but the field has not been fully equipped to address this new frontier.

This is where ReThink can play a pivotal role by bringing data and communications strategy to the conversation. Few organizations have the depth of experience, nor amount of data, found at ReThink when it comes to examining the coverage of nuclear weapons issues in the US media. In the spring of 2024, ReThink conducted a media audit examining over 2,000 articles in leading American news and opinion outlets to analyze how media coverage on China and nuclear weapons has evolved over the last three years. We released our findings and recommendations through a series of in-person briefings and webinars for advocates, researchers, and funders. Each session balanced the presentation of our analysis with discussions focused on their implications. We shared insights from the data and actionable recommendations for how advocates can more effectively shape the media narrative going forward.

Developed as part of an ongoing commitment to help the nuclear community promote a more balanced US-China relationship that enables constructive nuclear arms control dialogues, ReThink's 2024 media audit was generously supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Ploughshares Fund. ReThink staff are building on this research by strengthening the voices of aligned experts in the media, as well as developing shared strategies across adjacent fields to counter alarmist US media narratives on China and US nuclear security.

Themes Found in News Quotes



Graph provided by ReThink staff

Using Survey Data in Advocacy Communications

We live in a world full of numbers. But most advocates are not trained in how to use those numbers for strategic communications—how to read surveys, how to evaluate polling data, how to talk about data to non-expert audiences, how to incorporate statistics into persuasive messaging. And in a highly consequential election year, we saw an even greater need for advocates to use the data flying at us every day.

So we took our partners to summer school. In July and August, ReThink launched a webinar series to help communicators explore how to use data, statistics, and polling in effective advocacy and civic engagement efforts. Cohosted by Adrienne Lynett (Associate Director of Research & Analysis) and Eva Galanes-Rosenbaum (COO and research team cofounder), the three-part series drew over 180 attendees from over 100 different advocacy and research groups around the US.

In addition to the live sessions themselves, we provided follow-on support for advocates: additional resources, session recordings, and a companion blog series in the fall to help nonprofit advocates and communicators better understand and use the torrent of public opinion data traditionally released in the weeks before and after elections. As we enter a new year, we are exploring new topics to build on our data and communication education series in 2025.

HELPING SHAPE CRITICAL MEDIA MOMENTS

Lights, Cameras, Day-of-Action

Last July, when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was invited to address a special joint session of Congress, ceasefire advocates and leaders in the Palestinian rights movement saw a pivotal opportunity to shape the media narrative around the unabated genocidal violence in Gaza. Working behind the scenes, ReThink successfully ensured that the media coverage surrounding the address included the voices of Palestinian, Muslim, Arab, and Middle Eastern leaders in the US, as well as allied ceasefire advocacy groups.

In collaboration with partners and community leaders, ReThink Program Directors Randa Wahbe and Mac Hamilton developed and implemented a campaign that leveraged the expertise of ReThink staff with direct, on-the-ground support for advocates on the planned day of action. Working hand-in-hand with partners, ReThink staff developed community talking points and press materials, coached potential spokespeople, and secured press attendance at partner-organized events.

On the day of the address, in coordination with Rising Majority and the Grassroots Global Justice Alliance, ReThink staff served as on-the-ground press liaisons. Resulting coverage ran in Rolling Stone, Politico, The Washington Post, The New York Times, USA Today, NBC Washington, and the Associated Press—with wire photos and stories being used by news outlets across the nation.

Amplifying the ‘Prayers of Nuclear Weapons Testing Victims’

In an era when Congress is perpetually deadlocked and the US is deeply divided, we saw at least one bright spot this year: growing consensus that the US government must expand aid to communities across our nation affected by decades of nuclear weapons development and testing. Throughout 2024, ReThink staff actively supported partners working to expand the aid included in the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act (RECA) by creating a communications strategy and leading a media engagement campaign to amplify voices from impacted communities.

Building on the media coverage surrounding the summer 2023 release of Christopher Nolan’s “Oppenheimer,” we and our partners kept RECA in the headlines for over a year. One highlight was a spring 2024 effort managed by Frank Yuwen Chen (ReThink’s nuclear portfolio staff lead) to coach, edit, and place an op-ed by two Vietnam veterans representing communities directly impacted by US nuclear testing. After weeks of collaboration with the authors and editors, the op-ed (“Speaker Johnson, hear the prayers of nuclear weapons testing victims. It’s time to act.”) ran this past June in USA Today.

The expanded version of RECA passed the Senate in March 2024 with an overwhelming 69-30 bipartisan majority; we will continue to fight alongside our partners to secure final passage of RECA in the new Congress.



Photo provided by ReThink staff



We have a duty now to take care of everyone sickened by their own government in the creation of our nuclear arsenal.”

REP. JAMES MOYLAN
AND LESLIE BEGAY

ALWAYS LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Empowering Youth Voices Never Goes Out of Style at ReThink

A cold, snowy weekend offers the perfect chance to slow down, enjoy a warm beverage, and catch up with friends and family. But for over 200 young voting rights advocates across Ohio, the weekend of February 16, 2024, was an energizing opportunity to gather and explore strategies for amplifying youth voices in important policy discussions. Some of our team joined them in Columbus, leading a series of workshops on effective communication strategies throughout the weekend summit.

Led by Cristina Robinson, Acting Director of ReThink's Inclusive Democracy Collaborative, the sessions offered students hands-on opportunities to refine their messaging and narrative-building skills. In the months following the training, ReThink staff worked with students to shape the media narrative on local youth civic engagement efforts—including preparing students for media interviews and helping to secure media coverage. We built on these efforts with a virtual convening in the fall featuring a panel of leading pollsters and youth voting rights activists on current trends in organizing and advocacy communications. Anchored by Senior Communications Associate Hayley Savino, the September webinar (“Can you speak Gen Z?”) was attended by almost 70 advocates from 11 states.



Photo provided by Ohio Young People's Platform Coalition.

Passing the Mic to a New Generation of Advocates

Part of passing the mic to new voices includes creating opportunities for young advocates to learn and lead—including within our own organization. Over the years, ReThink has built deep relationships with both the Herbert Scoville Jr. Peace Fellowship and Progressive Pipeline, ensuring that young people placed with ReThink gain and polish advocacy communications skills and contribute insights that build on their lived experiences, and to expand the pipeline of communicators entering the advocacy field.

Among the many projects our 2024 fellows worked on, one standout was an ambitious plan co-developed by Lily Lucas and Rosie Berman to pitch longform audio journalists on an inter-generational conversation on the role of student voices in American peace movements. These two young professionals worked doggedly over many months to make this missing story a reality, from patiently sourcing the right advocates for an honest and open discussion to tirelessly pitching podcasters.

On the last day of the DNC Convention in Chicago, the segment “Anti-War Organizing, Student Activism, and the Uncommitted Movement” aired on the Center for International Policy’s Un-Diplomatic Podcast. The hour-long conversation was hosted by the Stimson Center’s Julia Gledhill and explored insights from Institute for Policy Studies Fellow Phyllis Bennis and Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) student activist Roua Daas on last spring’s campus demonstrations and how advocates can work past generational differences for the greater good.



We have to give [student organizers] all the support that they need and encourage everything they are doing because it’s extraordinary, and it will be what changes the world.”

INSTITUTE FOR POLICY STUDIES
FELLOW PHYLLIS BENNIS

NEW YEAR, NEW OPPORTUNITIES

Even after a whirlwind of a year, we are under no illusions that 2025 will be anything but tough. Externally, the political landscape for all of the movements we support looks bleak. We expect to face significant challenges to the status quo (already unacceptable) and resistance will require enormous fortitude, strategic maneuvering, and collaboration. We know our partners—large and small, new and seasoned—are exhausted from a year (many years) of fighting hard for what is right.

At the same time, we know that great challenges also present opportunities. The media and communications leadership that ReThink provides will be essential for capitalizing on those chances while fortifying the collective resilience within our movements. This work will not be easy, but we will adapt to those challenges and be ready to fight.

For ReThink, this is also the right moment to examine our model with the goal of strengthening our impact. We are currently in the midst of a deep strategic planning process with our staff and board that will help us fortify movements for these fights ahead. While ReThink has a solid foundation from its first 17 years, much has changed in the movement, media, and political landscapes. We are hard at work refining what we're great at, what needs work, and where we want to go in the next era of the organization's life.

This intensive process kicked off in the summer of 2024 and we expect by the summer of 2025 to have an updated plan—which is, of course, when the real work begins. This process is led by our leadership team, guided by our board of directors, and continues to be improved by the invaluable input of our staff and partners. The result will be an organization that has adapted to meet the communications needs of the moment with an even greater emphasis on bringing specialized communications expertise to bear on the crucial issues we work on.

In the meantime, ReThink is already deep into designing work for the year ahead that will better utilize data to drive strategy, deepen movement infrastructure, and expand collaborations with advocates, funders, and communications practitioners. We will begin to experiment with new qualitative and quantitative research and analysis methods, we will layer in noticeably more digital communications expertise, and we will place a greater emphasis on providing multifaceted communications support around shared advocacy work within the coalitions we support. While we work to finalize a plan that will strengthen ReThink for years to come, we know there is no time to lose getting to work now.

While we are not immune to the exhaustion felt across the advocacy field, we are acutely sensitive to the fact that our movements continue to have critical communications needs and we are brimming with ideas for how to engage this next set of challenges. If anything, we have too many ideas for our work going forward. We look forward to bringing the best ones to life with your partnership.

rethinkmedia.org

