

Narrative Strategy: The Basics

Liz Manne, Kirk Cheyfitz, Milan de Vries, Dom Lowell,
Eli Pariser, Erin Potts, Erica Williams Simon

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LIZ MANNE
STRATEGY

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WHAT IS NARRATIVE STRATEGY?

NARRATIVE STRATEGY DEFINED

Narrative Strategy is the practice of sharing connected stories to forge, spread, and reinforce beneficial narratives and counter harmful ones. These stories must be aligned to have a cumulative impact. And to be effective, they must take us on a journey from where we are today to a better future, revealing a new way the world can and should work.

CONVENTIONAL ADVOCACY & POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS

Conventional advocacy and political campaigns focus primarily on influencing specific policies, laws, and elections using programs that are frequently siloed — like strategic communications, grassroots and field organizing, and legal and public policy advocacy. These are sometimes referred to as the “air game,” the “ground game,” and the “inside game.”

AIR GAME

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

- Paid Advertising
- Earned Media (press)
- Shared/Social Media
- Owned (newsletters)

GROUND GAME

GRASSROOTS & FIELD ORGANIZING

- Deep Canvassing
- GOTV
- Phone & Text Banks
- Direct Action
- Live Events

INSIDE GAME

LEGAL & PUBLIC POLICY ADVOCACY

- Policy Papers
- Legislation
- Lobbying
- Impact Litigation
- Amicus Briefs

NARRATIVE STRATEGY DIFFERS IN THREE IMPORTANT WAYS

1 CULTURAL ORGANIZING is added to the mix of programs.

2 STORYTELLING is embedded in every program.

3 NARRATIVES are used to eliminate silos and to align, coordinate, and assure the cumulative impact of efforts to build a better, more just, more inclusive world.

1 CULTURAL ORGANIZING ADDS THE “HEART GAME”

Cultural Organizing is not to be confused with celebrity “surrogate” programs to boost fundraising and media attention (a common tactic in political campaigns). Rather, it forges deep, emotional connections with audiences, centering artists, media makers, and cultural influencers — micro-influencers as well as mass-market celebrities — as storytellers advancing social change.

HEART GAME

CULTURAL ORGANIZING

Artists & Athletes
Creative Activism
Hollywood Storylines
Fandoms

STORYTELLING DRIVES ENGAGEMENT AND PERSUASION

Storytelling is the best way to change anyone's mind about anything.

Whether you're working on a near-term campaign (Equal pay for women!) or a longer-term effort to disrupt fiercely held narratives about the way the world works (There are only two genders!), storytelling is what's going to change the current narrative and get you to your goal.

Narratives are comprised of stories, storytelling is the only way to change the narrative.

A hundred million stories about Love is Love — in our favorite TV shows, from family members, in our court cases — rewrote our shared narrative about what marriage looks like. Millions of #MeToo stories permanently altered our collective sense of what's "OK" in the workplace. George Floyd's murder, captured on video, was a single story, repeated by millions of voices on multiple channels with a galvanizing, hopefully lasting, impact. It resonated because it was a specific human story that amplified a pattern of stories we have known for too long.

Storytelling has enormous potential to scale because everyone is a storyteller:

organizers, protesters, lawyers, artists, advocates, and everyday people. Storytelling is a universally shared human skill.

3

NARRATIVE INTEGRATES ANY AND ALL ENGAGEMENT TACTICS TO ADVANCE A GOAL



Change happens when all of our storytelling — digital campaign content, press interviews, deep canvassing, TV shows, songs, impact litigation, legislation — is cumulatively working to advance beneficial narratives and counter harmful ones.

NARRATIVE STRATEGY IS THE ULTIMATE STRATEGY

With Narrative Strategy, we deploy integrated, strategic, storytelling to interrupt shared discourse and shift collective beliefs about how the world works.

Using Narrative Strategy, campaigns can be scaled almost infinitely, working on a single-issue initiative in a small rural county or addressing a global challenge. Narrative Strategy can flexibly handle near-term efforts to change a single policy and long-term movements to change worldwide culture.



Some call it **the ultimate integrated strategy: aligning four powerful ways to engage audiences and change the world.**

By changing narratives, we change norms, conversations, and culture.

We open up space for new ideas, new policies and entirely new ways of thinking that allow us collectively to build a better, more just, more inclusive world.

EXAMPLE: GENDER JUSTICE

FORGING A SAFE, FAIR, AND JOYFUL FUTURE FOR PEOPLE OF ALL GENDERS



EXAMPLE: CAREGIVING

ENSURING CARE IS VALUED AND CAREGIVERS ARE RESPECTED, VISIBLE, AND SUPPORTED

OPINION

The People Who Look After Your Children Deserve Basic Rights

A new bill would give nannies, house cleaners and home care workers long overdue protections.

July 14, 2019

By Ai-jen Poo
Ms. Poo is a founder of the National Domestic Workers Alliance which organizes and advocates for these workers.

The nannies, housecleaners and home care workers who fought for generations to be included in federal labor protections will take a big step toward this goal when Senator Kamala Harris and Representative Pramila Jayapal introduce the National Domestic Workers Bill of Rights this week.



116TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

S. 2112

To enhance the rights of domestic workers, and for other purposes.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

July 15, 2019

Ms. HARRIS (for herself, Mrs. GILLIBRAND, Mr. BOOKER, Ms. KLOBUCHAR, Mr. SANDERS, and Ms. WARREN) introduced the following bill, which was read twice and referred to the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions

A BILL

To enhance the rights of domestic workers, and for other purposes.

A HEALTHY NARRATIVE ECOSYSTEM REQUIRES INVESTING IN BOTH THE DO-ERS AND THE SUPPORTERS OF NARRATIVE STRATEGY



STORYTELLERS AND STORY SPREADERS

The **DO-ERS** of narrative strategy are the ones who engage audiences directly by designing and leading campaigns, and telling and spreading stories that advance beneficial narratives. They deploy the four approaches described above: the air game (strategic communications and content); the ground game (grassroots and field organizing); the inside game (legal and public policy advocacy); and the heart game (cultural organizing).

FIELD- AND KNOWLEDGE-BUILDERS

The **SUPPORTERS** of narrative and culture change equip the do-ers by helping to build the field's knowledge, theory, practice, relationships, and resources:

- Researchers and Evaluators;
- Trainers;
- Conveners, Consultants, and Other Field Weavers and Builders, and, of course,
- Funders

INVESTING *MUST* INCLUDE PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION

Narrative Strategy only works when new stories reach and engage their intended audiences. Often narrative investments focus only on strategy, or on strategy and content creation without consideration for whether they're reaching and engaging their intended audiences. This means far too many wonderful and important stories never get a chance to meet their audience.

In a digital context, this means there must be budget for content iteration (to find the sweet spot that audiences respond to) as well as for paid ads and promotion via earned media (to ensure that the content actually gets in front of them).

2

**HOW WE
KNOW IT
WORKS**

WE KNOW NARRATIVE STRATEGY WORKS BECAUSE WE CAN MEASURE IT

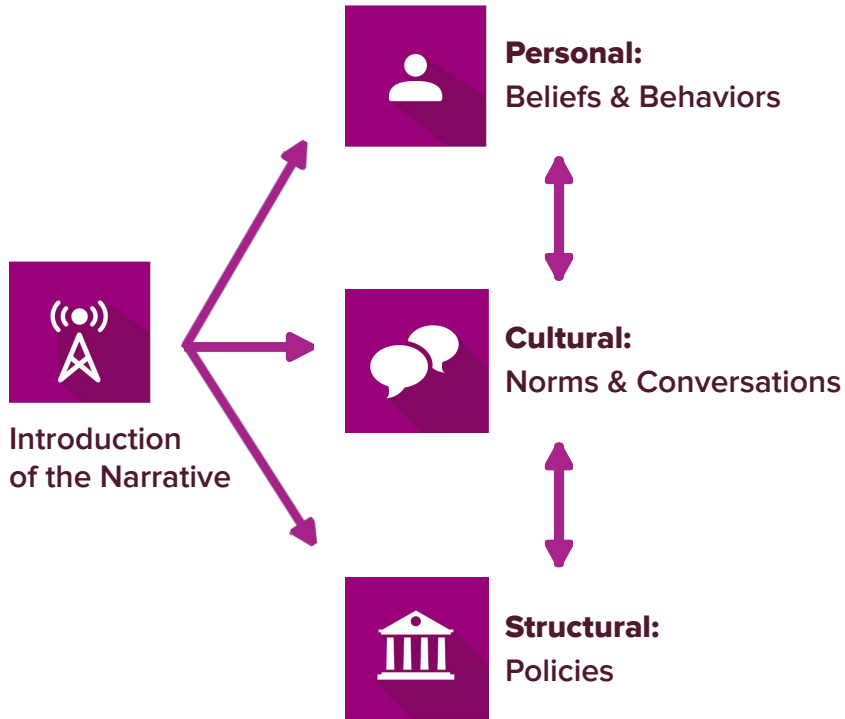
We know Narrative Strategy works because as a core output it produces content and we can measure the efficacy of that content both at engaging and persuading audiences.*

Beyond that, Narrative Strategy not only wins today (e.g., the campaign you're applying it to), but we can also measure that it wins the tomorrow (e.g., shifts narratives and narrative beliefs more generally).

That's part of what makes it a fundamentally good strategy. More on how it all works — and how we measure how it works — in the next slides.

* We measure both engagement and persuasion in order to learn how effectively content attracts and holds the attention of its intended audiences as well as whether the content is having its intended effect on them (for example via measuring changes in awareness, knowledge, attitude, perceptions, or behavior). Engagement without persuasion (or vice versa) isn't sufficient: both are needed to result in the desired impact. See [Building a Creative Strategy](#), the video testing report from [Story at Scale](#), to learn more about content measurement.

NARRATIVES MANIFEST AT 3 DIFFERENT LEVELS



At the **PERSONAL** level, we find narratives through the patterns of stories individuals tell, consume, and share. These story patterns represent the ways individuals think the world works. *(Example: My sibling comes out.)*



At the **CULTURAL** level, we find narratives in the patterns of stories that are widespread in our media and entertainment. *(Example: Ellen)*

At the **STRUCTURAL** level, we find narratives manifested in the policies, laws, and norms of institutions and nation-states. *(Example: the end of "Don't ask, don't tell")*




These levels of narrative interact. The same narrative patterns that shape stories told in our culture and in our policies also shape the understandings we have in our minds, which, in turn, form the content of our culture and our policies and laws ... and so on.

MEASURING NARRATIVE CHANGE: SMOKING

STORIES AND NARRATIVES THAT HAVE CHANGED

	FROM	→	TO
STORY		→	
NARRATIVE	Smoking is <u>healthful and restorative</u> . Not to mention cool, fun, and glamorous.	→	Smoking is gross and will kill you (and the people around you).

EXAMPLES OF MEASURES OF CHANGE

PERSONAL	CULTURAL	STRUCTURAL
 Attitudes toward smoking Support for government intervention	 Positive/negative portrayals of smoking in movies, TV, and ads	 Smoking bans, taxes, and other laws and policies Smoking rate

MEASURES FOR EACH OF THOSE 3 LEVELS

THE MEASURES

OUR GOAL



Personal:
Beliefs & Behaviors

Content testing (RCTs): engagement, persuasion



Cultural:
Norms & Conversations

Media tracking: Measure the creation and consumption of news, entertainment, and social media content especially over time.

Public Opinion: Track beliefs over time.



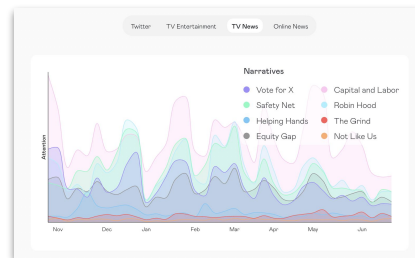
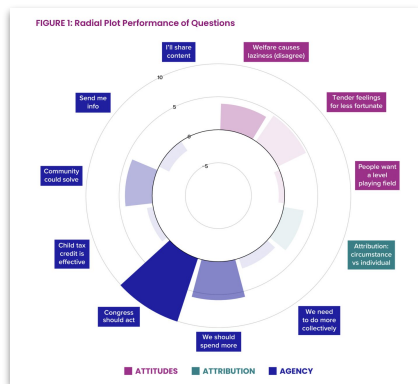
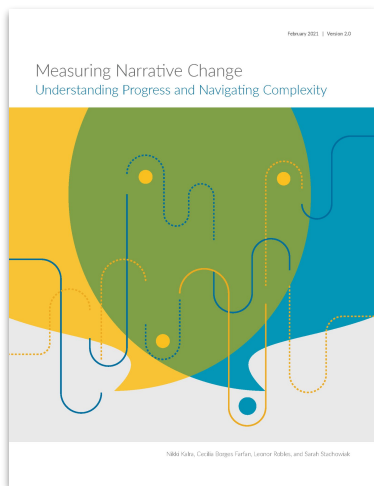
Structural:
Policies

Policy tracking: Measure the existence, adoption, enforcement, and impact of laws and policies.

A better,
more just,
more inclusive,
joy-filled,
healthy, and
sustainable
world.

STANDARDS AND PRACTICES IN MEASURING NARRATIVE CHANGE ARE STILL EMERGING ... BUT THERE ARE EXCITING INNOVATIONS HAPPENING

Approaches to measuring narrative change have significantly advanced in recent years. Methods have been developed, in particular, to assess the direct impact of narrative programs on personal beliefs and to track cultural change over time. More work is still needed to standardize these approaches in the field and to track narrative impact through to policy and other outcomes.



Sources: [Measuring Narrative Change](#) (ORS Impact), [Measuring the Impacts of Poverty Narrative Change](#) (Green, de Vries), [Narrative Observatory](#) (Harmony Labs), [The Features of Narratives](#) (FrameWorks Institute)

REMEMBER TO MEASURE REAL-WORLD IMPACT

Whether at the personal, cultural, or structural level, narrative measures must be augmented with hard measures of the desired impacts on people's day-to-day lives — metrics of economic and racial equity, of fairness and justice, of longer and healthier lives, of inclusion and community ... and much more.

3

**OUR APPROACH
TO NARRATIVE
STRATEGY**

WE RELY ON (AND LEARN FROM) MULTIPLE DISCIPLINES

Neuroscience says our memories are formed as stories, and (only) new stories can rewrite the existing ones in ways that change our beliefs and behavior. The right kinds of stories, in other words, are the essential tools of persuasion.

Narrative theory, sociology, and psychology agree that effecting change depends on understanding the relevant stories inside the minds of the people to be persuaded — the “audience.” The audience can only absorb and be persuaded by new stories that intersect at one or more points with the stories that already exist in their heads.

Our research over the past six years shows again and again that narratives are most effective at making change when they:

- Intersect with the audiences’ pre-existing narratives;
- Create a basis for stories that the can be authentically told by the people seeking change — the storytellers; and
- Narrate a future that the audience yearns for and wants to live in.

OUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES: THE 3 E'S

EQUITY

We apply an equity lens to everything we do, continually asking: “How will this make the lives of those most harmed by racism and discrimination better?”

EMPIRICISM

We measure, test, learn, and iterate, focused on answering the questions: “How do we know? What’s our evidence?”

ENGAGEMENT

Narratives only exist because audiences collectively consume, hold, and share them. This means we always ask, “What does the audience think? How do we engage them?”

HOW WE DEVELOP A NARRATIVE STRATEGY THAT WORKS

From narrative and communications research efforts we've been involved with and/or learned from, we've come to believe in a 5-step iterative process that interweaves strategy and systems mapping, community co-creation, and formal audience research to develop narrative hypotheses. From these hypotheses, we create, learn, and iterate until we have a winning storytelling strategy to advance narrative change and ultimately, our social change goal. After we have a strategy that works, then, of course, there is the hard work of deploying it across the audience engagement channels discussed above: strategic communications, grassroots organizing, advocacy, and cultural organizing.

1 MAP, SCOPE & DESIGN

Clarify goals, build a system map, and determine where narrative efforts can change system dynamics. Align stakeholders around the strategic approach.

2 AUDIENCE RESEARCH

Gain insight into target audiences: *who* are we trying to reach, *what* do they believe, *how* are we trying to affect them, and *what would we measure* to know if we did? Develop "narrative hypotheses" to test through creative testing.

3 CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT

Identify and refine "narrative hypotheses" with stakeholders and co-creators. Develop creative briefs to guide creative work.

4 CREATIVE VALIDATION

Produce hashtags, taglines, copy, calls-to-action, static images and/or other content in forms suitable for experimentation and testing. Measure for engagement and persuasion to validate narrative hypotheses.

5 DISTRIBUTE AT SCALE

Deploy new narratives via organic, earned, and paid media; grassroots organizing and advocacy efforts; and cultural organizing.

Measure impact and continually refine.

← APPLY THE 3 E'S THROUGHOUT ALL PHASES OF WORK: EQUITY, EMPIRICISM, ENGAGEMENT →

MAP, SCOPE, AND DESIGN

Key Questions

What are our goals?
(What are the concrete outcomes we seek and for whom?)

How does the system work now?

What are the intervention points that narrative tools can help shift?

Can we align key stakeholders and communities around this strategic intervention?



Process

Ingest existing knowledge and research

Map key systems and stakeholders

Survey potential future states

Conduct preliminary audience research

Convene key stakeholders



Outputs

Scoped, aligned theory of narrative intervention



APPLY THE 3 E'S THROUGHOUT ALL PHASES OF WORK: EQUITY, EMPIRICISM, ENGAGEMENT



Key Questions

For this particular intervention:

Who are the key audiences we aim to shift?

What are the relevant stories they currently tell themselves and others?

What do they care about?

Where do they consume media?

How will we know if we are shifting them?



Process

Conduct additional audience research, including narrative landscaping

Identify key metrics for shift



Outputs

Target audience briefs, including narrative profiles and cultural consumption

Measurement methodology



APPLY THE 3 E'S THROUGHOUT ALL PHASES OF WORK: EQUITY, EMPIRICISM, ENGAGEMENT



WHEN LEARNING ABOUT YOUR INTENDED AUDIENCES, WE RECOMMEND THINKING ABOUT THEIR VALUES AND CULTURAL CONSUMPTION HABITS IN ADDITION TO THEIR DEMOGRAPHICS

HARMONY LABS'S NARRATIVE OBSERVATORY HAS IDENTIFIED FOUR VALUES-BASED AUDIENCES.

Each audience centers a core value (Community, Autonomy, Order, or Authority) that drives how audience members understand themselves and the world. The values clusters derive from Shalom Schwartz's [theory of basic human values](#). Harmony explains that we can think of values as basic psychological goals that inform how people engage with different kinds of social issues (racial and gender justice, economic mobility, health care, and more).

At LMS, we endorse and use this framework as a practical mode of improving our storytelling. It reminds us that not everyone shares our mindset and helps us counter the risk of just speaking to ourselves.

Learn more about values-based audiences [here](#).



Source: [Harmony Labs's Narrative Observatory](#)

Key Questions

What stories might produce what shifts with what audiences?



Process

Identify and sort narrative hypotheses



Outputs

Provisional creative briefs



APPLY THE 3 E'S THROUGHOUT ALL PHASES OF WORK: EQUITY, EMPIRICISM, ENGAGEMENT



Key Questions

How can we translate promising narratives into compelling stories?

Which narratives are actually effective in producing shifts?



Process

Produce lightweight content (videos, statics, copy)

Distribute content and measure results (measuring for engagement and persuasion effects)

Learn and iterate



Outputs

Hypothesis-driven lightweight content

Validated creative brief



APPLY THE 3 E'S THROUGHOUT ALL PHASES OF WORK: EQUITY, EMPIRICISM, ENGAGEMENT



Key Questions

How can effective narratives be deployed across all kinds of storytelling and media in strategic communications, grassroots and field organizing, legal and public policy advocacy, and cultural organizing?

Which narratives are reaching the most people and having the most impact?



Process

Spread narratives and content using all four audience engagement programs: comms, organizing, advocacy, and culture, e.g.:

–Large-scale digital content operation

–Narrative organizing: NGOs, CBOs, Hollywood writers' room, journalists, faith leaders, business leaders, lawmakers

–Press/comms “war room”



Outputs

Effective storytelling produced and distributed widely



APPLY THE 3 E'S THROUGHOUT ALL PHASES OF WORK: EQUITY, EMPIRICISM, ENGAGEMENT



4

APPENDIX: KEY TERMS, RECOMMENDED READING, ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

KEY TERMS: NARRATIVE

MESSAGES provide information about a brand or campaign's features or benefits.

STORIES involve characters, setting, and plot: something happens to someone somewhere.

NARRATIVES are patterns of stories that are held by individuals or groups and contain beliefs about the way the world works. They can be harmful, beneficial, or a mixture.

Narrative Strategy is the practice of sharing connected stories to forge, spread, and reinforce beneficial narratives and counter harmful ones.

These stories must be aligned to have a cumulative impact.

And to be effective, they must take us on a journey from where we are today to a better future, revealing a new way the world can and should work.

KEY TERMS: CULTURE

CULTURE HAS TWO DEFINITIONS:

CULTURE is the prevailing beliefs, values, and customs of a group.

CULTURE is the set of practices (including storytelling and artmaking) that contain, transmit, or express ideas, values, habits, and behaviors among individuals and groups.

Cultural Organizing is a field of practice that centers artists, storytellers, and other cultural influencers (as well as their audiences) as agents of social change and transformation.

RECOMMENDED READING

Narrative Strategy — and its sibling Cultural Strategy — are still evolving fields. Measurement standards, in particular, are still nascent, but recently, there have been significant innovations and discoveries. To learn more, we recommend the following:

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