Guiding Narrative Change

Considerations for the Philanthropic Field

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FRAME WORKS

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Narrative Change and Social Change

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Narrative change is increasingly recognized as a key social change strategy, whether the goal is to change social norms, behaviors, policies, institutions, or systems. Yet it can be hard to pin down what narrative is, how it changes, and what role it plays alongside other social change strategies.

Because narrative is so fundamental to society and culture, the ways to talk about it are widely varied. What's more, because the field of "narrative change" is very much in formation, so is its vocabulary. For these reasons, when the conversation turns to narrative change, it is filled with overlapping, competing, and evolving terms and concepts, which can make it hard to communicate or assess ideas clearly. At times, imprecise vocabulary can reflect or cause more substantive or strategic issues. Without a grounding in theory and research on narrative, it can be tough to discern evidence-based claims about the power of narrative from hyperbole. Should we believe the often-heard claim that narrative shapes reality? What makes the difference between narrative change efforts that lead to meaningful and sustained change and those that fall flat? Once a narrative project is underway, what options are available to monitor and measure its impact?

This resource, created by the FrameWorks Institute with the support of a grant from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, is designed to help the philanthropic field clarify concepts, absorb key lessons from previous research and practice, and use the best available evidence to guide and support narrative change. The aim is to promote a more consistent and nuanced understanding of narrative change, how to achieve it, and how to support it.

This resource begins with a "visual glossary" of key terms and definitions that uses graphic organizers to show connections and distinctions between key concepts.

After these brief definitions, additonal elements follow.

- A conceptual framework for the relationship between commonly used concepts in social change communications

- Lessons from a meta-analysis of research on narrative change

- Resources to guide narrative change efforts, including sets of strategic questions, checklists, and more

Key Concepts

Because narrative is fundamental to society and culture, the ways to think and talk about it vary widely. Concepts, perspectives, and practices on narrative come from the arts, academic scholarship, applied research, social change and communications practice, philanthropy, and more. In addition, narrative is part of a concept family—a constellation of similar understandings from different fields—which multiplies and fragments the language used to describe even a single idea. Overlapping, competing, and evolving terminology can muddy conversations, create unproductive distractions, and lead to competing or contradictory projects and areas of work.

To promote clarity in thinking, we organize the following glossary conceptually rather than alphabetically. Some terms may appear more than once, as they relate to other terms in more than one way. We hope this visual glossary serves as a useful tool in cutting through jargon and finding a clear path toward sharper strategy and more effective collaboration.

Narratives | Mindsets

In the context of social change work, narrative is sometimes used to mean narratives in discourse (what we see and hear) or narratives in mind (how we think and make sense of the world). Often, the terms are used interchangeably, or assumed to mean the same thing.

		Definition	Example
	Narratives	Patterns of stories in public discourse	In the *"bootstraps narrative,"* an individual down on their luck struggles to overcome obstacles, but beats the odds and succeeds.
	Mindsets	Widely shared patterns in thinking	The *individualism* mindset involves the assumption that outcomes are almost exclusively due to an individual's character, choices, or willpower.

FrameWorks finds it most useful to distinguish between narratives and mindsets.
In this resource and in our work more generally, we use the terms cultural models or cultural mindsets to describe patterns in public thinking. We reserve the term "narrative" for patterns of stories in public discourse.
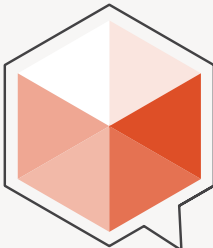
Here's why. Reserving "narrative" to mean "patterns of stories in public discourse" helps us keep in mind key characteristics of narrative:

1. **Narratives have a form**. Narratives are tied to stories, which involve a set of features, like character, plot, and setting, arranged in a particular way. The form and features give rise to distinctive and strong effects. If we use the term "narrative" to refer to something that doesn't involve the form and features of stories, we miss what makes narrative distinctive and what gives it power.

2. **Narrative change is one type of social change strategy**. Not every social change strategy seeks to change patterns of stories in public discourse. (Thus, not every social change or cultural change approach is working toward "narrative change.") If we use the term "narrative change" too broadly or loosely, our strategies and theories of change get hazy—it becomes unclear what we are trying to shift, how we are trying to shift it, and why shifting it matters.

3. **Narratives are a means to an end, not an end in themselves**. Narratives are powerful, but the existence of a new narrative is not the end goal. Narrative change efforts matter because of the effects of narratives. They can help to achieve goals like shifting mindsets, changing social norms, or changing systems. If we don't articulate these ultimate goals, it's hard to develop, drive, or assess a new narrative.

In addition, if our vocabulary and vantage point distinguish between patterns in discourse and patterns in thinking, we are better able to look at the relationships between them and examine how changes in one can produce changes in the other.

Narrative | Story

Narratives are the templates; stories are the tellings. That is: Narratives are recurring patterns that cut across stories and tie them together. Stories are tales about particular events and people. Both narratives and stories have familiar features like character, plot, setting, and point of view. Both narrative and stories feed each other: particular stories draw from overarching narratives, and the patterns in narratives can only exist because of the many stories that embody them.

|		Definition	Example
	Narratives	Are templates: recurring patterns of meaning that cut across stories and tie them together	A *template*. In the "bootstraps narrative," an individual down on their luck struggles to overcome obstacles, but beats the odds and succeeds.
	Story	Are tales about particular events and people; may be true or fictional	A *telling*. In the TV show Empire, a family rises from poverty to become executives in a successful record company.

Narrative | "Not-Narrative"

Narratives have the features of story: characters, plot, setting, point of view, and evaluative judgments ("the moral of the story").

Not all patterns in language or discourse are narratives. If a recurring pattern doesn't have recurring characters or familiar plots, it simply isn't a narrative.

Sometimes, the term narrative is used to refer to the following "not-narrative" patterns in language:

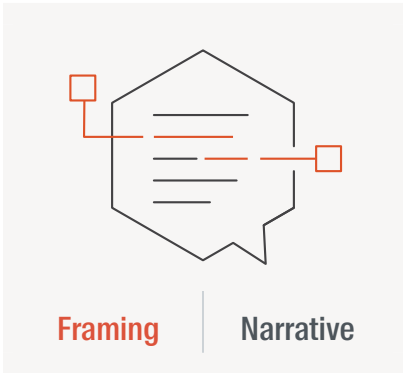**Narrative**   **"Not-Narrative"**

- **Theme:** the central message or underlying meaning of a story. Narratives have a theme, but themes are not narratives in and of themselves.

- **Talking points:** pre-established messages repeated in coordinated political communications.

- Argument: a reason or set of reasons organized to support a thesis or point of view.

- **Media angle:** the point of view or "take" on events expressed by journalists or other media commentators.

- **Value:** a connection between a topic and a broadly cherished principle, like freedom, justice, or dignity.

- **Issue frame:** an assertion that a topic is best understood as a matter of a larger social issue, such as an "economic issue," "national security issue" or "mental health issue."

FrameWorks finds it most useful to reserve the term "narrative" for patterns in discourse that have the features of story and give rise to familiar, recurring stories. In some contexts, there's little harm in using the term "narrative" as a near-synonym for closely related ideas. But when the stakes are high, the risks of imprecision increase. If we use the term "narrative" to refer to something that doesn't involve the form and features of stories, we miss opportunities to leverage the distinctive power of narrative and understand how it works and what effects it can have. Mislabeling can also lead to unrealistic expectations and disappointment because we didn't engage in narrative change work yet continued to hope for the types of impact that only narrative change can yield. It increases the risk of ineffective or inefficient approaches, such as deploying storytelling or other narrative-related tactics in settings where they are wasteful at best, counterproductive at worst.
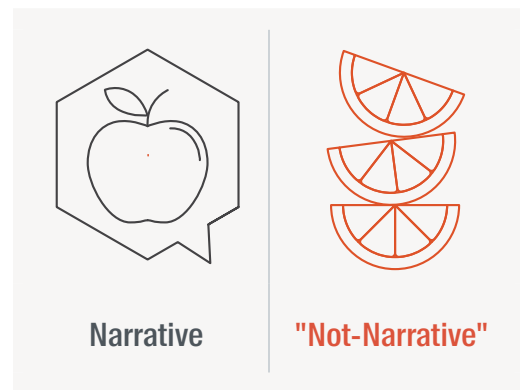
Framing | Narrative

Framing involves choices about how an issue is presented—what is and isn't emphasized, how it is explained, what connections are made, and which commitments are invoked. Framing choices are not context-specific: The same frame (e.g., a value like freedom) can be applied in different ways in different contexts. Framing choices can be diffused in ways that don't centrally involve an overarching narrative or specific stories (such as through scientific argument, moral appeals, or normalization). When effective framing choices are embedded into narratives, however, the result is an especially powerful way to shift cultural mindsets.
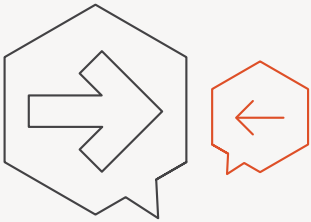
Narratives are recurring patterns in discourse that have the features of story: characters, plot, setting, point of view, and evaluative judgments ("the moral of the story") and cut across and link many stories. Many framing choices are embedded in narratives—for instance, the "bootstraps narrative" embeds values like self-sufficiency and hard work. Narrative, as a form, is a powerful way of changing the framing of an issue because narrative involves many stories, many storytellers, and many audiences. As a narrative is amplified, its saturating presence in public discourse, over time, shifts mindsets. Moreover, because stories have distinct effects on thinking, memory, and emotion, narratives can maximize the effects of framing choices within them.

Dominant Narrative | Counter-Narrative

Dominant narratives are the most prominent and prevalent ways of depicting an issue, topic, or group. While they may seem to have no point of view, they typically are told in the service of a dominant social group's interests and beliefs. Dominant narratives achieve power through repetition, through the apparent authority of the point of view, and the silencing of alternative representations.

A counter-narrative resists a dominant narrative by providing a different way of depicting an issue or group. Counter-narratives can be "emergent," arising organically from a community's experience. They can also be "cultivated," developed deliberately and strategically by advocates, activists, or other change makers.

	Definition	Example
Dominant Narrative	Most prominent and prevalent ways of depicting an issue, topic, or group	**Meritocracy.** When people succeed, it is the result of their own talents and hard work. We should all strive to emulate the successful.
Counter-Narrative	Resists a dominant narrative by providing a different way of depicting an issue or group	**The 99%.** Our country is designed to work for the wealthiest 1%. We, the 99%, can come togetther to change it.

Narrative Shift Strategy | Strategic Communications

A narrative shift strategy (or narrative change effort) aims to shift cultural mindsets by introducing or amplifying counter-narratives, which have the form and features of stories (plot, character, setting, point of view, etc.). Because cultural mindsets are deep, durable, and widespread, narrative change strategies must be large-scale and long-term to have the desired effect. It's also important that narrative change strategies are multi-modal—appearing in many different formats and in various channels of communication. Thus, narrative change strategies involve collective, extended efforts to create and diffuse stories to broadly reshape public discourse, thinking, and decisions on a particular topic.

Strategic communication campaigns seek to achieve time-bound, specific outcomes through the purposeful sharing of ideas and information. The desired outcomes are typically less ambitious than a cultural mindset shift. Ideas and information may be shared through stories that align with an overarching narrative, but may take other forms.

For maximum impact, narrative change strategies include and influence strategic communications efforts. For instance, imagine a strategic communications campaign aiming to get a piece of legislation on a public agenda. This campaign could include stories that draw from and amplify a longer-term narrative shift effort to build a more collective mindset on public responsibility for the issue.

Narrative Shift Efforts

Collective, extended efforts
to broadly reshape public
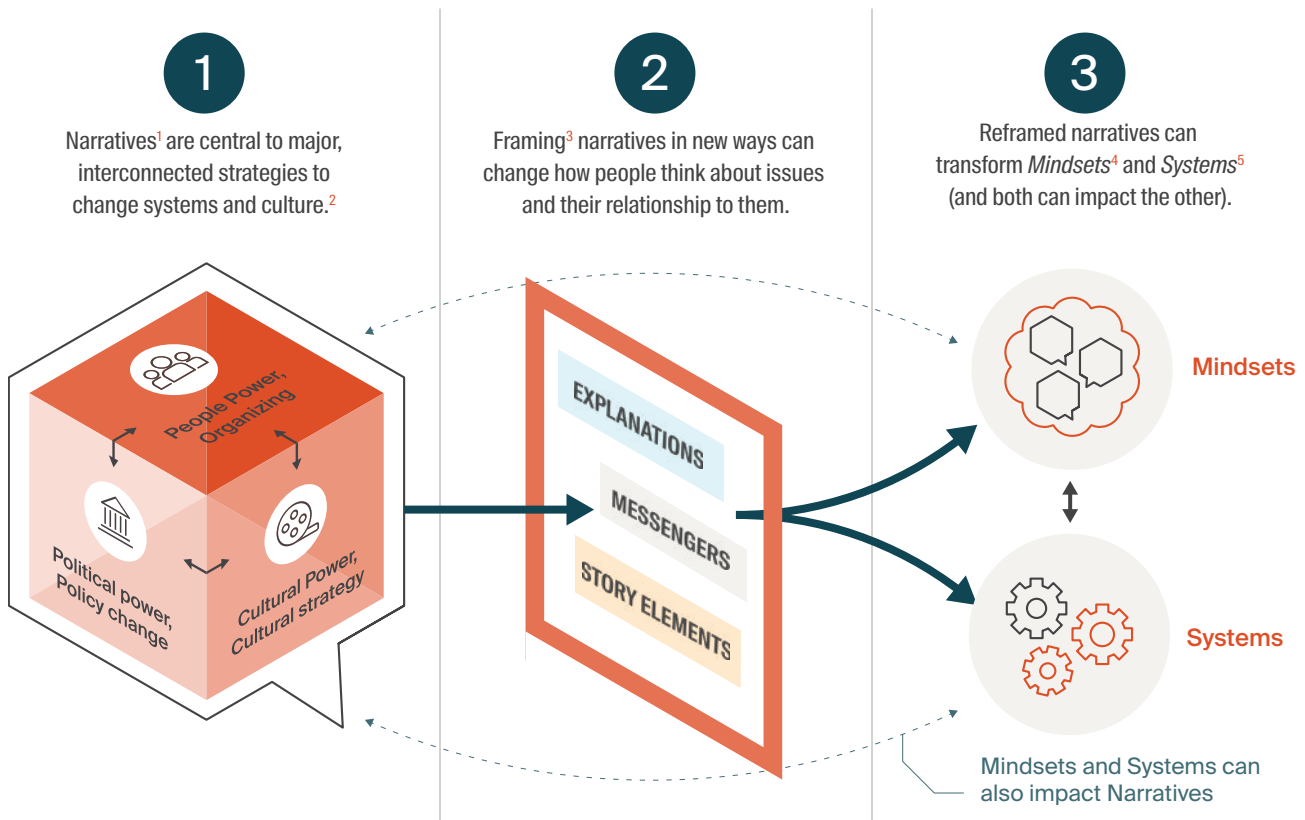discourse, thinking,
and decisions on
a particular topic

Strategic Communication Campaigns

Targeted, time-bound
efforts to influence particular
behaviors, policies,
or other outcomes
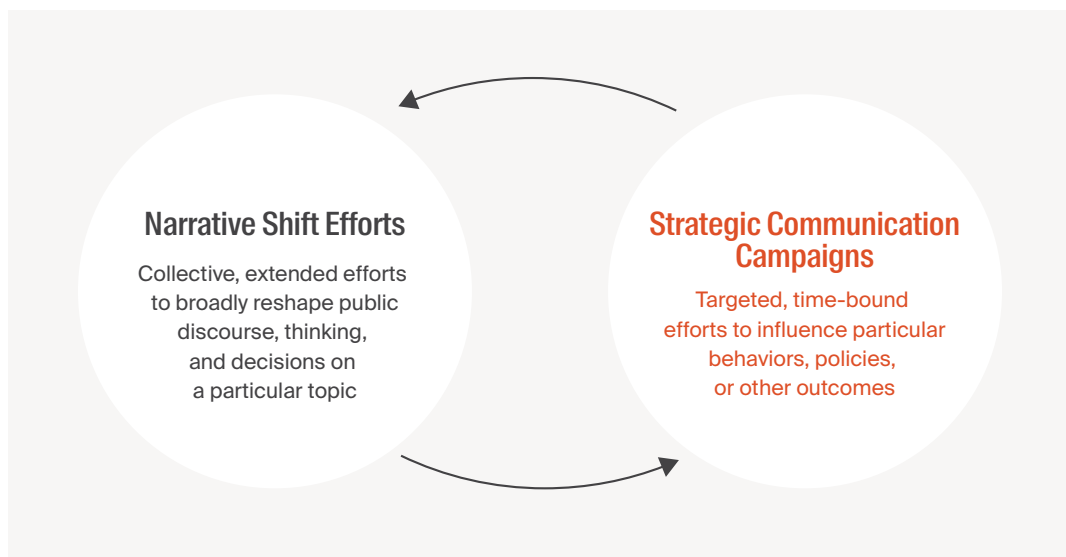
How does narrative change fit with other strategies?

This figure illustrates the interconnection between common social change strategies, narrative change, and their ultimate outcomes.

1 Narratives[1] are central to major, interconnected strategies to change systems and culture.[2]

2 Framing[3] narratives in new ways can change how people think about issues and their relationship to them.

3 Reframed narratives can transform *Mindsets*[4] and *Systems*[5] (and both can impact the other).

Mindsets

Systems

Mindsets and Systems can also impact Narratives

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1. **Narratives** are common patterns in stories, which include common features like characters, plot, and setting. A familiar example is the Bootstraps Narrative, in which a person overcomes adversity through hard work. Many framing choices are embedded in narratives – for instance, the Bootstraps Narrative embed values like self-sufficiency and hard work. With sufficient presence in public discourse, over time, narratives can shift mindsets.

2. **Culture** refers to both material realities and ideologies. Culture affects, and is affected by, framing narratives, mindsets, and systems.

3. **Framing** choices are different ways to present ideas. Examples of framing choices include messengers, examples, and metaphors. Because framing choices can make a measurable difference in how people understand and interpret ideas and information, they can shift elements of a

system, change mindsets, and be embedded into narratives that shift mindsets.

4. **Mindsets** are deep, assumed, and widely shared patterns of thinking that shape how we make sense of the world and what we do. One example of a widely shared mindset is consumerism, which involves implicitly understanding access to resources as a transactional process of buying and selling. Mindsets can work to justify systems as they are, serve to critique existing systems and their effects, or allow us to envision new and better ways of organizing society.

5. **Systems** are complex arrangements that involve tangible elements (policies, practices, resources) and intangible elements (relationships, power dynamics).[12] Systems can be formally organized and discrete (such as the criminal legal system) or pervasive and semi-explicit (such as racial hierarchies and systemic racism).

Why Change Narratives?

2

Narrative has many meanings, which are tied to its many uses. To psychoanalysts, narrative is a means to articulate and externalize internal conflict so that healing can occur. To novelists, playwrights, and screenwriters, narrative provides a way of grappling with human experience and emotionally transporting audiences or readers. To a journalist, narrative is one way of conveying information about current events and issues.

For those who work for social change, narrative is important because of its role in cuing and cultivating cultural mindsets. Recurring narratives interact with and influence cultural mindsets to shape perception of reality, both individually and collectively.[1] Through their effect on mindsets, narratives can create a shared understanding of the world, but they can also limit our perspectives and perpetuate biases. By being aware of how narratives and stories shape reality, philanthropy can identify and target narratives—and strategies to change them—as leverage points for systems change.

It is possible to change systems directly, without shifting mindsets and the narratives that reinforce them.[2] Such changes, however, may be incremental or short-lived, as when a policymaker who has served as a champion or protector of a policy or practice leaves power. To change systems and structures at scale and for the long term, it's necessary to change the mindsets that justify and support them.

Our understanding of reality is not solely determined by objective facts, but also by the cultural mindsets we use to interpret how the world works. In turn, the way we perceive reality can either justify systems as they are or motivate us to change them for the better.

For those who work for social change, narrative is important because of its role in cuing and cultivating cultural mindsets. Our understanding of reality is not solely determined by objective facts, but also by the cultural mindsets we use to interpret how the world works. In turn, the way we perceive reality can either justify systems as they are or motivate us to change them for the better.

For instance, by highlighting certain aspects of a problem, stories can call up hopeless, fatalistic mindsets about an issue, or more optimistic, efficacious mindsets. Stories that zoom in on a single character's flawed choices are more likely to reinforce individualistic mindsets. Stories that zoom out

to engage people in understanding an issue's history or underlying causes are more likely to reinforce contextual thinking, setting the stage for collective policy priorities and preferences.

Recurring, dominant narratives are patterns of stories that shape cultural mindsets at a mass scale. These narratives are nearly omnipresent, which sometimes makes them easy to miss and hard to describe precisely. For instance, the *Dominance Narrative* is often repeated through stories that depict the triumph of "pioneers" over nature and indigenous peoples—from stories of settler colonialism in the US (*Little House on the Prairie; Yellowstone*) to science fiction films depicting colonialism on other planets (*Avatar; The Martian*).

No matter the features of a particular story, the *Dominance Narrative* tells us that humans are the "masters" of nature, not ordinary participants in it. This narrative draws from, and reinforces, mindsets that model ecosystems as "resources" and dismisses the perspectives of indigenous peoples who model ecosystems differently. In turn, this mindset justifies the practice of displacing indigenous peoples who steward naturally occurring materials so that the materials can be extracted. In this way, the *Dominance Narrative* shapes decisions both intimate and international—from families' daily meals to global trade deals. Whether or not we are explicitly aware of the *Dominance Narrative*, it influences our daily material reality and the meaning we make from our experiences in that reality. Narratives cue mindsets which shape how we see the world.

Narratives are not the only way to change mindsets, but they are a uniquely powerful way to do so. Humans are hard-wired to notice, enjoy, and remember stories. When we read, hear, or watch the telling of events with familiar features like character, plot, setting, and point of view, it taps into our innate human desire for connection, understanding, and meaning. Neuroscience has revealed that stories have a profound impact on our brains. When we engage with a story, our brains activate multiple regions involved in empathy, imagination, memory, and a sense of reward.[4]

Given these effects, it's not surprising that scholarship across disciplines has identified a set of specific benefits of story—effects that stories are uniquely capable of producing.[5] Compared to other ways of organizing discourse (like explanation, argumentation, or description), stories:

- **Are more immersive:** They transport people into another world, enabling them to imagine what life is like for other people or in other places, making it easier for people to reconsider how they think about others and, in turn, social issues.[6]
- **Evoke stronger emotional responses:** Stories can elicit a wide range of emotions, from joy and sadness to anger and fear.[7]
- **Are more memorable:** Stories create a lasting impression by associating information with emotional experiences.
- **Are more efficient:** Because stories rely on familiar features such as character, setting, and plot, our brains can make predictions and fill in elements that may be missing in a particular story. Once a narrative is established, stories can work through metonymy, in which a part of the story (a glass slipper) brings the whole story (Cinderella) to mind.

This neurological basis helps explain why stories and storytelling have been powerful tools for persuasion throughout history. When storytelling is strategically linked to an overarching narrative, additional benefits can accrue. Narratives have the capacity to spread, giving rise to many stories, many storytellers, and many audiences, across time and across formats. (For examples of how overarching narratives and specific stories have been used in social change, see Case Studies.)

The distinctive effects of narrative make it vital for the philanthropic field to make thoughtful decisions about whether and how to invest in narrative change. The following section outlines key lessons from previous research and practice in narrative change.

Lessons From Narrative Change Efforts

In any emerging field, ideas and insights abound, which can make it hard to see the forest for the trees. When it comes to narrative change, here are a handful of the clearest and most powerful lessons that can be gleaned from the best evidence available. This list isn't exhaustive, but it is actionable, offering solid ground for those seeking to guide narrative change.

LESSON 1: Narrative change strategies are most appropriate for broad social issues.
Narrative change efforts are collective, extended efforts to use storytelling to broadly reshape public discourse, public thinking, and decisions. Collective, extended efforts to move cultural mindsets make sense for big social issues, but not on highly specific, targeted, or technical ones. Because narratives are recurring templates that explain some broad underlying aspect of social life by tapping into fundamental cultural mindsets, trying to shift them makes strategic sense when the desired social changes are similarly broad. For instance, a narrative change effort might be appropriate to shift a mindset like "deservingness," which involves the assumption that some people are worthy of government assistance or other support, while others are unworthy due to their choices, character, or status. The discrete policies and practices that reflect that mindset— say, stringent eligibility requirements for everything from nutrition assistance to substance use treatment—would be too narrow and technical to merit the time and resources of an entire narrative change strategy. While a narrative change strategy on a broad social issue may have a collateral effect of shifting thinking about some more specific issue within it, if the goal is discrete, narrow or targeted—say, a specific policy change—a narrative change strategy doesn't make strategic sense. When goals are narrow, well-framed communications campaigns with measurable, near-term objectives are likely to be more efficient. When the goals are more diffuse and far-reaching, narrative change strategies may be appropriate.

LESSON 2: Changing narratives is a major undertaking but has potentially huge benefits.
Developing a powerful counter-narrative and using it to displace entrenched narratives and shift cultural mindsets is a massive endeavor. It doesn't happen overnight, and it doesn't happen without many different types of actions by many people.

There are different levers advocates can use to try to change narratives, but they are all, in different ways, difficult, time consuming, and costly. Trying to change culturally dominant narratives is ambitious, and the scale and resourcing of the effort must be similarly ambitious. Substantial effort and attention must be devoted toward coordination, not only across organizations and storytellers at a given point in time, but across multiple years and perhaps even decades.

The good news is that if narratives on an issue do change, it can have substantial, enduring, and multifaceted effects. Because narratives shape public mindsets, policymaking, and even the contours of our social relationships and norms, changing narratives opens the possibility of changes at each of these levels. Narrative change is a major investment, but one that has tremendous payoffs.

LESSON 3: Narrative change takes decades, not months or years.

Because dominant narratives are woven into the fabric of our culture, they take time to change. Counter-narratives can be introduced relatively rapidly, but it typically takes close to a decade for them to achieve wide salience and narrative presence and can take a generation or more to achieve desired outcomes by influencing and mindsets.

For example, the slogan "Black Lives Matter" and its corresponding social media hashtag were developed in 2012 and were widely diffused across the US by 2013. A decade later, the movement's narrative—that Black lives are inherently worthy and thus should not be subjected to violence perpetrated by the state—had strong narrative presence, and has influenced mindsets, but had not yet become a dominant narrative in US society. Given that many of the policy change goals of the Black Lives Matter movement are still unmet, it seems fair to say that its narrative power is nascent, but not yet fully realized. Arguably, efforts in 2020 and 2021 to suppress the teaching of race and racism in classrooms, and to stall professional learning and organizational change around diversity, equity, and inclusion were reactions, at least in part, to the burgeoning power of the Black Lives Matter movement and narrative.

LESSON 4: Effective narrative change efforts engage deeply with the form and features of narrative.

Narratives aren't just any pattern in information; they are patterns in stories—similarities in characters, plot, setting, point of view, and other familiar features of stories. Taking the form of story matters. That's because, when compared to other ways of organizing and presenting ideas, stories have a stronger and more consistent ability to connect to people emotionally, transport them, define their social identity, and help them process complex ideas. These effects are why narrative change has emerged as a vital aspect of social movement strategy.

Using the form and features of story is a defining feature of a narrative change strategy. Recognizing the form and feature of story is also helpful for discerning whether a narrative change approach is not merely desirable, but necessary. If a dominant narrative is being regularly repeated and reinforced through stories, only a strong counter-narrative—repeated and reinforced by many stories—is likely to displace it.

In other words: Be clear whether you're after a narrative shift, or some other type of change in public discourse, and then use the features of narrative in your strategy.

LESSON 5: Be intentional and explicit about approaches to landing on a potential narrative.

There are three general ways to develop narratives. Each can work and each comes with distinctive strengths.

1. Coalesce patterns in grassroots advocacy into a narrative.
2. Stretch and adjust existing narratives.
3. Develop wholly new narratives.

While these approaches can be integrated, it is vital for narrative strategy leaders to be both intentional and transparent about the preferred approach (or approaches). Doing so will maximize the narrative's potential while minimizing resistance or fracturing in the coalition needed to carry the narrative into storytelling. One way to discern the most appropriate approach is to consider who will need to be enlisted as storytellers and whether those storytellers would welcome or resist one approach or another. Whatever the approach to landing on a potential narrative, it's essential to test it—as described in the next lesson.

LESSON 6: Test your narrative before you launch it—and keep testing along the way.

Thorough, systematic, and comprehensive narrative testing is a foundational component of narrative change strategy. Because a narrative has powerful effects, it's wise to ensure that a soon-to-be-diffused narrative has the desired effect and to check carefully for unintended consequences.

Narrative testing differs substantially from message testing. Narratives involve multiple features that need to be included but can be ordered or emphasized differently. This calls for complex testing designs that allow for multiple variables to be manipulated in various combinations. In addition, narratives are templates that are "filled in" and expressed through storytelling. This means that it's important to make apples-to-apples comparisons of fully articulated narratives, so that any results speak to the effects of the narratives themselves rather than some aspect of their presentation.

Once a tested narrative has been deployed into the world of storytellers, it's important to keep building insights (or "narrative intelligence," to borrow a phrase from the Pop Culture Collaborative).[8] By taking a test-and-learn approach—with data and storytelling informing each other iteratively—narrative change efforts can get smarter as they go. Continued observation, analysis, and testing allow a narrative change effort to winnow less effective narrative features or stories, refine effective ones, gain confidence and insight from successes, and make judicious decisions about underperforming or ineffective strategies. Ongoing testing is also key to keeping the narrative strategy fresh, current, and responsive to the changes in context that will invariably occur over time.

LESSON 7: There's the narrative—and then there's the narrative strategy.

The most finely crafted narrative won't change anything if it's not widely shared and experienced.

A remarkably successful narrative strategy can suddenly start to fail or fall flat when dramatic events change the context.

For both reasons, organizations seeking to guide narrative change need to attend not only to the question of what the new narrative is, but to ensuring that the narrative becomes a ubiquitous presence in people's lives. Those approaches will involve building a narrative infrastructure that can achieve scale under current conditions—and is strong enough to adapt to changes outside strategists' control.[9] Narrative infrastructure refers to the systems and set-ups that allow multiple actors to work together over time to change narratives and mindsets in ways that matter.[10] The specifics will vary depending on context, and whether your efforts are focusing on politics, culture, or social connections, but the essential idea is to develop to a well-resourced, resilient collective impact network that includes the people and organizations with the expertise and access necessary to move narratives into public discourse at a scale and over a time period necessary to shift mindsets in ways that drive desired outcomes.[11] (For more detail on narrative infrastructure, see these resources in the next section: "Investing in Narrative Infrastructure: What Philanthropy Can Do," and "Assessing Narrative Infrastructure.")

Concluding Thoughts

Guiding Narrative Change: Considerations for Philanthropy offers a thorough grounding for funders seeking to support effective narrative change efforts. By understanding the critical role narratives play in shaping public opinion and driving social change, philanthropic professionals can make informed decisions about their investments.

The report emphasizes the importance of:

- **Understanding the current narrative landscape:** Identifying dominant and emergent narratives, their impact, and the audiences they influence.

- **Deciding whether a narrative change approach is appropriate:** Determining whether narrative change is warranted, and ensuring that the work harnesses core narrative principles and features.

- **Taking an empirical approach:** Identifying, developing, and testing narratives early in a narrative shift effort is essential, not a nice extra.

- **Developing a strategic approach:** Creating a clear plan for shifting narratives and achieving desired outcomes in public mindsets, norms, policies, and systems.

- **Investing in narrative infrastructure:** Supporting research and mission-driven systems for collaboration, creation, diffusion, and evaluation of storytelling.

- **Measuring impact and sustainability:** Evaluating the effectiveness of narrative change efforts and ensuring long-term sustainability.

Narrative change can and does play a vital role in shaping a more just, equitable, and sustainable future. Narrative change funders, strategists, and practitioners agree that for promising and proven practices to spread and scale, the field needs more investment, more sustained investments, and more strategic investments. By investing thoughtfully in narrative change, funders can build the power of grantees, partners, coalitions, and movements to challenge harmful mindsets, promote productive mindsets, and create the conditions for more effective, equitable systems.

Case Studies

3

To illustrate how framing, narrative, mindsets, and systems are connected in a process of intentional culture change, this section applies the conceptual framework to two well-known movements of the early 21st century: the climate justice movement and the Movement for Black Lives.

The Climate Justice Movement (2000-Present)

Cultural Context: While the climate justice movement is connected to the broader climate change movement, its narrative is distinct in important ways. Historically, the broader climate movement's narratives included recurring storylines of projected catastrophic futures ("gloom and doom"), the emergence of an incontrovertible scientific consensus, and the moral imperative of protecting children. While a precise starting point of the climate justice movement is debatable, a tangible turning point occurred in 2000, when the Rising Tide Network organized the first Climate Justice Summit. The purposeful timing—during the meeting of the United Nations' Conference of the Parties (COP6)—highlighted the injustice and paternalism of developed countries creating climate "solutions" for underdeveloped countries. In the United States, advocates began to more consistently connect social justice to climate change specifically in the aftermath of 2005's Hurricane Katrina, which devastated Black communities in New Orleans and led activists to argue that African Americans in particular were bearing the brunt of the effects of climate change vis-a-vis extreme weather events. Indigenous-led resistance was key to a decade-long effort (2011–2021) that successfully opposed Keystone XL, a proposed 1,400-mile-long pipeline that would run from the tar sands mines in Alberta, Canada, to the Gulf of Mexico.

Framing Choices: Climate justice activists have made several strategic framing choices:

- *A thematic narrative:* Rather than focusing narrowly on individual events, the climate justice movement has consistently connected climate change to broader themes of power and injustice.

- *A moral vision:* Articulation of values that ask us to consider climate change not only as a scientific, economic, energy, or conservation issue but as a matter of social justice.

- *Messengers:* The climate justice movement broke away from the historical framing of youth, which invoked children as symbols of a moral call that "adults" should act. Instead, it has looked to young people as leaders and spokespeople with the power to speak on behalf of the community. Youth voices also reflect a break from scientists as messengers, a recurring characteristic of other climate narratives.

- *Clear causal explanations:* Climate justice advocates consistently point to root causes of climate injustice, including the heat-trapping effects of fossil fuel energy, the failure of government to rein in or resist the influence of the fossil fuel industry, and an imbalance of power between those who benefit from fossil fuel extraction and those who are harmed by it.

- *Strategic use of data:* Climate justice advocates often juxtapose data to contrast who is contributing to climate change with who is being affected by it, e.g., "Black communities make the smallest carbon footprint, yet they face the worst of environmental degradation." This framing emphasizes that the impacts are not only uneven, but unfair—a technique that can motivate people to want change.

Narrative Elements: Coalitions like the Indigenous Climate Action Network and the National Black Environmental Justice Network have brought those framing choices together to form a narrative template that allows advocates and activists to draw from the form and features of an overarching narrative—and advance the narrative through storytelling about the effects that a reliance on fossil fuels has on Black and Indigenous communities. The climate justice movement leverages several formal features of narrative:

- Stories told from the **point of view** of Black and Indigenous communities who are resisting threats to health, wellbeing, or way of life posed by the extraction, use, and effects of fossil fuels for US energy needs.

- Recurring **character roles:** greedy and insensitive corporations; incompetent, indifferent, or compromised government officials; determined activists; ordinary community members inspired to join acts of resistance.[13]

- A prototypical **setting:** a community of color—often an economically marginalized or physically remote one—where community members have been harmed or threatened, directly or indirectly, from the actions of fossil fuel companies.

- An expansive **plot** that not only involves an immediate climate-related plight of a single community, but also includes the history and reality of many forms of environmental racism, the motivations and tactics of environmental bad actors, and the structural changes needed to prevent other communities from being harmed in similar ways.

- A moral to the story: An **evaluative judgment** that society must make a "just transition" from fossil fuels to forms of energy that do not disrupt the climate system, and do so in a way that builds and restores Black and Indigenous communities' wellbeing, wealth, and ways of life.

Mindset Shifts: Consistent narrative mobilization, primarily through earned media coverage of climate injustices, protests, and other direct actions, is leading to marked shifts in public thinking about who is responsible for climate change, who is affected by it, and what types of public response are appropriate. More than six in 10 Americans say large businesses and corporations and the energy industry are doing too little to address climate change.[14] Half of all adults in the US think that climate change harms lower-income people more than it harms wealthier people.[15] The Standing Rock Sioux Reservation "water protector" activists who opposed the Keystone XL Pipeline credit their narrative shift efforts with greater visibility for Native Americans and Indigenous perspectives and concerns in the US, going some way toward disrupting the persistent erasure of Native Americans from American public discourse.[16]

Systems Change: While the climate justice movement's ultimate goals are still unmet, it has undoubtedly achieved important wins in specific policies, practices, and resources. While the most visible specific win was, arguably, the successful effort to stop the Keystone XL Pipeline, its success has been repeated in other settings, such as stopping a gas power plant in Kearny, New Jersey. Federal focus has homed in on the intersection of environmental issues and social justice: In 2022, the Justice Department created a new office solely dedicated to environmental justice, focusing on environmental laws and protections in communities bearing the brunt of environmental pollution and climate change. Funding—both philanthropic and public—for climate adaptation is increasingly targeted toward communities facing the greatest burden from climate disruption.[17] The climate justice movement has sparked a notable increase in funding directed toward Native American-led organizations, particularly through initiatives like the American Rescue Plan, which allocated significant funds for American Indian and Alaska Native government programs, and major philanthropic donations from both major foundations and individuals.

Narrative Power and Resistance: As the climate justice movement achieves substantive change, it is also eliciting resistance. Conservative politicians and media outlets often criticize climate justice protests, portraying activists as unlawful and potentially violent.[18] Moreover, the fossil fuel industry is using the same framing that has slowed and thwarted the larger climate action movement—emphasizing a false dilemma that asks us to choose between protecting the environment and growing the economy. Yet there are also signs that the justice narrative is ascendant. One indicator of narrative presence and power is that the narrative begins to be carried by storytellers not originally or intentionally involved in the narrative change effort. While the 2001 Disney movie *Monsters, Inc.* only hinted at energy as a site of struggle for justice, by 2011, the oil industry villains in *Cars 2* and *The Muppets* were more specifically linked to fossil fuels.

Philanthropy's Role in This Narrative Change

Philanthropy has played an important role in advancing the climate justice narrative. Various funding strategies supported narrative presence, infrastructure, and power:

Supporting Narrative Presence

Philanthropy played a pivotal role in resourcing and supporting climate justice activists to share stories and ideas through multiple channels and formats, across multiple years.

- *Funding Media and Communications Initiatives:* Foundations supported independent media outlets, journalists, news desks, and documentary filmmakers to tell the stories of communities experiencing and resisting climate injustice. According to Judith LeBlanc (Caddo Nation) of the Native Organizers Alliance: "We interrupted the narrative of who and what Indian people are in the 21st century."

- *Aligning with the Movement's Narrative:* Over time, philanthropic institutions once narrowly focused on conservation of flora, fauna, and natural habitats have expanded their framework and funding to include the social justice concerns of human communities affected by environmental degradation.

Supporting Narrative Infrastructure

- *Organizational Capacity Building:* Philanthropy helped strengthen the capacity of Black-led and Indigenous-led organizations working on climate justice issues by providing funding for staff, operations, coalition-building, and programming.

- *Funding Public Perceptions Research:* Foundations have provided long-term support for ongoing research into public knowledge, attitudes, and opinions, equipping the movement with actionable insights to adjust narrative strategy and storytelling.

- *Providing Technical Assistance:* Philanthropy supported organizations with technical assistance and capacity building to enhance their communications and storytelling efforts.

The Movement for Black Lives (2012 – Present)

Cultural Context: The history of state-sponsored violence against Black people and Black resistance to that violence is longer than the history of the United States. The Black Lives Matter movement, which has its origin point in 2012, is situated within that history. Important elements of the sociocultural landscape immediately preceding the movement included a marked increase in police shootings of unarmed Black men, an increase in the ability for witnesses to record and share images of those shootings, and an uptick in media coverage of both shootings and recorded incidents.

Framing Choices: Grassroots digital activists Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi made several strategic framing choices at the inception of their work. These included, but were not limited to:

- A strategic decision to reframe police shootings by critiquing and rejecting episodic[19] media coverage that treated recurring incidents as discrete, disconnected events. Instead, Cullors, Garza, and Tometi introduced and elevated a thematic narrative, which made intentional connections among incidents of police brutality.

- Articulation of a **value** expressed not in the narrow language of specific political or civil rights but through an expansive moral vision: "a world where Black lives are no longer systematically targeted for demise."[20]

- Identification and clear causal **explanations** that pointed out unjust elements of policing, including implicit bias, lack of transparency, and lack of accountability.

Narrative: The Movement for Black Lives incorporated those framing choices into a narrative template that allowed countless stories to draw from its form and features—and advanced that overarching narrative through countless retellings of the episodes. The movement leveraged several formal features of narrative:

- Recurring **character roles:** unarmed Black men; hasty or hateful police officers; and community activists pointing out the role of wider systems in an incident.

- An expansive **plot** that involved not only the immediate circumstances of the shooting, but began with an exploration of the humanity of the person who was killed and concluded with the post-shooting actions necessary to change systems and provide accountability

- Stories told from the **point of view** of Black communities, where experiences of police bias,

misconduct, and violence were widely known

- A memorable and recognizable **title for** the counter-narrative (#BlackLivesMatter) that allows the name itself to bring the full narrative to mind

Mindset Shifts: Consistent narrative mobilization, primarily through intensive digital activism, created a marked shift in the public's thinking about the criminal legal system and the role of race and racism in it. In 1995, a majority of Americans believed the criminal legal system gave Black people "fair treatment." By 2015, the percentage that thought the system was "biased against Blacks" increased by almost 30 points. Moreover, FrameWorks' ongoing tracking of mindsets showed that Americans became more likely to think about racism as a structural issue, rather than an individual issue, in the wake of the uprisings of 2020—an important shift that appears to be deeper and more sustained than a short, contextual change in opinions of the moment.[21]

Systems Change: It would be an overstatement to claim that the Movement for Black Lives has achieved its vision, but it has undoubtedly achieved important changes to policing systems. For instance, measures for transparency have increased dramatically: 79 percent of all local police now work in departments that use body-worn cameras or patrol car dashboard cameras. Accountability measures have also expanded, as officer-involved shootings are widely publicized and scrutinized, and officers are more regularly prosecuted and convicted for unnecessary use of force against Black civilians.

Narrative Resistance: As the movement's narrative began to achieve change, it also sparked resistance. For instance, conservative politicians and media outlets often criticized the BLM movement, portraying it as a violent and destructive force. Many law enforcement agencies have resisted calls for reform, arguing that the BLM movement is anti-police and undermines law and order. Such struggles for narrative dominance are the norm, rather than the exception, in narrative change efforts—and these struggles can be all the more intensely fought and felt when counter-narratives threaten entrenched power structures such as racial hierarchies.

Philanthropy's Role in This Narrative Change

By providing resources and support, philanthropy helped to provide the Black Lives Matter movement with the tools and visibility necessary to amplify its message and drive change.[22] Various funding strategies supported narrative presence, infrastructure, and power:

Supporting Narrative Presence

Philanthropy played a pivotal role in resourcing and supporting BLM activists to share stories and ideas through multiple channels and formats, across multiple years.

- *Funding Media and Communications Initiatives:* Foundations supported independent media outlets, journalists, and documentary filmmakers to tell the stories of Black communities, police violence, and systemic racism.

- ***Supporting Social Media Campaigns:*** Philanthropy funded social media campaigns and digital organizing efforts to elevate stories, mobilize supporters, and amplify the voices of Black activists.

- ***Aligning with the Movement's Narrative:*** Foundations aligned their own communications and other strategies with the movement's narrative, from issuing statements at crucial moments to inviting peer organizations and grantees to take a stand.

Supporting Narrative Infrastructure

- ***Organizational Capacity Building:*** Philanthropy helped strengthen the capacity of Black-led organizations working on racial justice issues by providing funding for staff, operations, and program development.

- ***Providing Technical Assistance:*** Philanthropy supported organizations with technical assistance and capacity building to enhance their communications and outreach efforts.

Supporting Narrative Power

- ***Advocacy and Policy Change:*** Foundations supported advocacy efforts to push for policy reforms related to policing, criminal justice, and systemic racism.

- ***Funding Research and Analysis:*** Foundations supported research and analysis on racial justice issues, providing evidence and data to strengthen the BLM narrative and inform policy recommendations.

- ***Sustained Support:*** Foundations have continued to support and fund the movement and the broader cause even as political contexts, public sentiment, and organizational leadership have changed and, in some ways, become less hospitable to the movement and its goals.

Resources for Philanthropists Investing in Narrative Change Strategies

4

While developing this resource, we interviewed multiple grantmakers and philanthropic staff and revisited interviews with narrative change practicioners from previous research and strategy projects. This section includes organizers, planning tools, and checklists that respond to practical questions and needs expressed by interview participants who are supporting or guiding narrative change efforts.

Does a narrative change strategy make sense?

Start by examining key factors to assess when and whether a narrative shift strategy makes sense.

A narrative change effort isn't appropriate for every issue. Some issues are too narrow or niche for a narrative strategy to make sense, while others may not lend themselves naturally to narrative and storytelling. Review the following factors to determine if a narrative change strategy makes sense:

Does the topic or issue area lend itself to a narrative strategy?	▪ Is the topic/issue area big and broad? ▪ Is the issue salient, or capable of becoming so? ▪ Does it have the makings of compelling, emotionally transporting stories?
Does the level of need justify a narrative change effort? ("Is the juice worth the squeeze?")	▪ Are the current narratives hindering progress toward desired outcomes? If so, in what ways? ▪ What are the potential consequences of failing to change the narrative? Could inaction lead to negative outcomes or reinforce existing inequities? ▪ What are the potential benefits of succeeding in changing the narrative? Would a narrative change have positive ripple effects?
Does the topic or issue area have a constellation of potential narrative change partners?	▪ Does a field of advocacy already exist around the issue? ▪ Is there a leading organization that could be the central node of a narrative network? ▪ Does the field have good capacity in communication and cross-organizational collaboration?

Refining an Early Idea

Planning for an effective narrative change effort is difficult because there isn't a model for easy replication, but the nature of the undertaking requires forethought and collaboration. It's not work that can be undertaken alone. The opportunities and obstacles can be unpredictable, and the resources required can vary widely. The number of elements to consider and the array of external influences make it even more important to plan thoughtfully from the outset—and to be able to give and receive feedback on early-stage thinking. Even though there will be a need for flexibility and adaptation as plans unfold, an early plan is essential.

This tool offers considerations for strategists looking for ways to assess or refine an early plan for narrative change work.

Questions to Consider

What's the purpose?	▪ What needs to change? ▪ What are the goals for change? (Policies, practices/behaviors, power dynamics, something else?)
What about narrative needs to shift?	▪ The point of view narrating the issue? ▪ The representation of certain recurring (or absent) "characters"? ▪ The solutions that recurring stories suggest? ▪ The aspirations that recurring stories bring to life? ▪ The reach, ubiquity, or repetition of the narrative?
Who will the new narrative reach?	▪ Which audience(s) will the initiative prioritize, and why? ▪ How and where will the initiative express its narrative to reach prioritized audience(s)? ▪ Are sufficient resources available to reach those audiences and achieve significant narrative presence over time?
How will the effort fit into the issue landscape?	▪ How will the initiative leverage (or break with) the history of narratives on its issue? ▪ How will the initiative integrate or complement other social change strategies?
Who will be the storytellers?	▪ How will the initiative engage people who are affected by the problem? ▪ How will the initiative engage current storytellers and other potential allies? ▪ How will the new narrative invite more and more participants in telling it?
What assumptions and hypotheses do you need to test before moving forward?	▪ What questions about current narratives do you need to explore through baseline research? ▪ What working narrative hypotheses might you need to test through research?
How will the initiative develop and share narrative intelligence?	▪ How will the initiative develop and enhance its collective knowledge about narrative? ▪ How will the initiative prototype, pilot, or test its narrative before mobilizing it? ▪ How will the initiative learn, assess, and adjust over time?

Additional Resources on Refining Early Ideas:

Mindset Shifts: What Are They? Why Do They Matter? How Do They Happen?
FrameWorks Institute, 2020.

How Do Other Fields Think About Narrative?
FrameWorks Institute, 2021.

Funding Narrative Change. Convergence, 2022.

Sample Logic Model for Narrative Change Efforts

Because narrative change efforts tend to have broad goals and diffuse activities, it's important to clearly express "what leads to what." This sample logic model offers one way to think about the inputs, outputs, and outcomes of a strategy that is led by a national or well-resourced organization. The logic model of a grassroots-led effort may differ.

Note that this logic model calls for investments in elements of narrative infrastructure, such as a group convened for collective impact, shared narrative research, and shared ongoing assessments of story reception and impact.

Inputs →	Outputs		→	Outcomes / Impact	
Narrative Investments	**Narrative Activities**	**Narrative Availability**	**Medium Term**	**Medium Term**	**Long Term**
Group convened for collective impact	Identify key audiences & tactics to reach them	Story output in multiple media / formats	Narrative fidelity (stories align with shared narrative & framing)	Narrative salience	Mindsets shift in desired directions
Shared analysis of desired mindset shifts	Foster wide circle of aligned storytellers	Narrative presence with key audiences	Narrative reception (e.g. emotional transport, identifying with characters)	Narrative pickup (new storytellers adopt it)	Systems change to become more just, inclusive, and equitable
Shared narrative to advance	Produce & publicly share stories			Narrative impacts (e.g. stories help achieve discrete wins)	
Shared evidence of effective framing choices	Assess and adjust narrative, stories, placement, connections among storyellers				

Potential Tactics for Narrative Change

For funders to assess the strength and potential of partners and grantees' plans for narrative change, it's vital to understand the tactics being proposed. The presence of key tactics can indicate a well-developed approach.

These tactics are strong, proven, and expected for narrative change efforts:

- **Advance Research:** Pre-test narratives and analyze their potential impact. Conduct audience research to determine who to reach and how.
- **Policy Advocacy:** Incorporating new narratives into policy language and campaigns.
- **Grassroots Organizing:** Building and amplifying the advocacy and narrative power of the people closest to a problem.
- **Cultural Strategy:** Engaging creatives and influencers to diffuse new narratives.
- **Strategic Communications:** Disseminating the overarching narrative through selected channels in a time-bound, targeted campaign.
- **Partnership Efforts:** Fostering and strengthening relationships and collaborations among organizations working on related issues.
- **Professional Learning:** Providing training and resources to individuals and organizations involved in narrative change.
- **Measurement and Evaluation:** Assess narrative reach and effect, narrative infrastructure, or other aspects of the narrative change strategy.

How Do I Know Who to Fund? Identifying and Assessing Key Narrative Change Organizations

To seed and cultivate narrative change, foundations and other funders typically need to identify and support a central organization over a period of 10–15 years.

This resource outlines the ideal characteristics of promising central organizations (sometimes known as backbone organizations). It's unlikely that any organization will exemplify all of these characteristics at the outset, but a strong candidate will possess most and model many.

1. **Deep Understanding and Commitment:** Deep understanding and organizational commitment provide the basis for effective leadership and sustainable change in a narrative shift effort. Look for:

   - **Narrative Change Expertise:** A clear understanding of narrative change strategies, including their theoretical underpinnings and practical applications.
   - **Long-Term Vision:** A commitment to long-term, sustained efforts to shift narratives, recognizing that change is often gradual and requires ongoing commitment and investment.
   - **Resource Allocation:** Willingness to invest in building a team, designing a strategy, and implementing programs.

2. **Collaborative Approach:** Because narrative change can only be accomplished through the work of multiple storytellers, organizations, and coalitions, the central organization must be an exceptional collaborator, across different types of entities and organizations (including the media and pop culture space). Look for:

- **Partnership Building:** A strong ability to form effective partnerships with a diverse range of stakeholders, including community organizations, public entities, businesses, artists and storytellers, and media and entertainment outlets and companies.
- **Ecosystemic Thinking:** A recognition of the interconnectedness of various systems (culture, media, policy, economy) and the need for a holistic approach.
- **Synergistic Thinking:** A history of combining different tactics to amplify the impact each could have alone.

3. **Multifaceted Strategy:** A multifaceted strategy allows the central organization to address complex issues, engage diverse audiences, and adapt to changing circumstances. Look for:

- **360-Degree Social Change**: A comprehensive approach that includes policy advocacy, organizing, communication campaigns, and cultural strategy (using media and culture to shift attitudes, norms, and mindsets.)
- **Tactical Flexibility:** An organizational culture that embraces the need to adapt strategies and tactics as needed based on emerging trends, challenges, and opportunities, and specifically the ability to adapt narrative change strategies across various platforms (channels) and through various social change tactics and mechanisms.
- **Data-Driven Decision Making:** A commitment to using data and research to inform decision-making and measure the impact of narrative change efforts.

4. **Aligned Values:** To build trust among collaborators and to inspire and sustain a lasting initiative, strong values and ethics are key characteristics of a backbone organization for a narrative change effort. Look for:

- **Equity and Justice:** A focus on addressing systemic inequities and ensuring that narrative change efforts promote social justice and equity.
- **Shared Vision:** Alignment with organizations that have similar goals and are interested in contributing to the narrative shift effort.
- **Ethical Communication:** A commitment to ethical communication practices, including transparency, honesty, and respect for all stakeholders.

5. **Sustainability and Adaptability:** Narrative change efforts unfold over multiple years and invariably encounter significant changes in context. This makes it vital that a central organization is sustainable and adaptable. Look for:
- **Leadership and Innovation:** A forward-thinking organizational culture committed to finding new and creative ways to address challenges, including the ability and inclination to pilot and experiment with narrative change tactics and learning and pivoting/adapting depending on outcomes.

- **Long-Term Planning:** A focus on building sustainable organizations and initiatives that can continue to adapt and evolve over time.
- **Resilience**: The ability to withstand setbacks and challenges, and to learn from failures and successes.

Investing in Narrative Infrastructure: What Philanthropy Can Do

Philanthropy has a crucial role to play in **building narrative infrastructure**—the relationships, resources, know-how, and power a field needs to achieve narrative change. Just as our physical infrastructure involves many different elements, many of which go unseen, so does narrative infrastructure. The list below helps to make the elements explicit. By investing in these areas, philanthropy can help to build a more robust and effective narrative infrastructure that can drive positive social change:

1. **Supporting narrative research and analysis:**
   - **Fund research** to understand public opinion, cultural mindsets, and the dominant narratives on specific issues.
   - **Support the development** of tools and methodologies for pre-testing narratives and analyzing their potential impact.
   - **Support ongoing data collection and analysis** to understand narrative reach, storytelling effectiveness, and other key indicators.

2. **Investing in backbone organizations to lead narrative strategy, narrative development, and narrative diffusion:**
   - **Fund opportunities** for grassroots advocates to coalesce their stories and strategic communications into an overarching narrative.
   - **Fund the testing** of overarching narratives that can serve as a template for storytelling efforts and campaigns
   - **Fund backbone organizations to work with creatives on the production** of high-quality storytelling and impact campaigns around documentaries, films, TV shows, podcasts, and digital content.
   - **Support organizations** that are skilled in storytelling and can effectively communicate complex ideas to diverse audiences.
   - **Support backbone organizations that are, as part of their strategy, working with** media outlets that are committed to producing informative and thought-provoking content.

3. **Cultivating narrative partnerships:**
   - **Foster and fund collaborations** between philanthropy, media organizations, artists, and community leaders.
   - **Support the formation** of narrative coalitions that can learn from each other and amplify the impact of storytelling efforts.
   - **Encourage cross-sector partnerships** to address complex social issues through narrative-based approaches.

4. Building capacity for narrative change:

- **Fund programs** that teach narrative strategy and storytelling skills to individuals and organizations.
- **Support the development** of curriculum and resources for teaching narrative strategy, analysis, and creation.
- **Invest in professional development** opportunities for artists, journalists, filmmakers, and other professionals who work with narratives.

5. Building narrative power at the margins:

- **Support initiatives** that promote diversity and inclusion in storytelling.
- **Fund projects** that amplify marginalized voices and perspectives.
- **Encourage the use** of inclusive language and imagery in narratives.

6. Measuring narrative impact:

- **Support the development** of metrics and tools for measuring the impact of narratives.
- **Fund research** to assess how narratives influence public opinion, policy decisions, and societal actions.

7. Sustainability and long-term impact:

- **Support institutionalization:** Fund efforts to integrate narrative change into the long-term strategies of organizations and collectives.
- **Foster sustainability:** Invest in initiatives that ensure the continued relevance and effectiveness of narratives.

Additional resources on supporting narrative infrastructure:

Changing Our Narrative About Narrative: The Infrastructure Required for Building Narrative Power. Rashad Robinson, 2018.

Want Narrative Power? Invest in Narrative Infrastructure, Tracy Van Slyke, Pop Culture Collaborative, 2022.

Narrative Infrastructure for Narrative Immersion (A Strategic Grantmaking Framework) Tracy Van Slyke, Pop Culture Collaborative, 2022.

Stages of Narrative Change

Narrative change takes decades, not months. Maintaining commitment to and discipline in this long-term work—and the partnerships required to do it—can be difficult. It can help to have a sense of the stages and progressions of this process. This framework can help strategists see where they are in the process of narrative change and figure out what comes next.

Emergent: Narrative Product	Developing: Narrative Presence	Advanced: Narrative Power	Achieved: Narrative Dominance
What it looks like: The desired narrative is expressed in an observable medium but unproductive narratives remain dominant. Narrative infrastructure may be nascent or almost absent.	**What it looks like:** The desired narrative is widely available, regularly accessed, and emotionally resonant. Narrative infrastructure exists.	**What it looks like:** The desired narrative forces a change in decision-making and/or material reality. Narrative infrastructure is expanded.	**What it looks like:** The desired narrative becomes the dominant narrative and shifts mindsets in ways that change systems.
Examples: 2012: Facebook conversation among Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi 2013: Black Lives Matter logo, website, and social media accounts Dominant mindsets assume that policing creates safety, not harm	**Examples:** Between 2013 and 2023, over 44 million tweets used the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag. Nearly 10 million distinct users created or shared a tweet containing the hashtag. Evidence of opening for mindset shifts exists: 2017 Pew poll found that 54 percent of white Americans viewed officer-involved shootings of Black people to be signs of a broader problem	**Examples:** Influential voices on community safety represent communities, not cops. Productive mindsets on safety become more salient; unproductive mindsets become less pronounced. Officer-involved shootings are widely publicized and scrutinized. 79 percent of all local police now work in departments that use body-worn cameras or patrol car dashboard cameras. Bans and limits on no-knock warrants are proliferating in state and local policy.	**Examples:** *(Aspirational—not achieved yet)* Narratives aligned with "defund the police" are dominant.Dominant mindsets assume that community wellbeing creates safety. Officer-involved shootings are exceptionally rare or non-existent. Community-led public safety approaches are the norm; militarized policing is rare and socially dispreferred. Race does not predict risk of involvement in the criminal legal system.

Assessing Narrative Change

Because narrative change efforts unfold across long time horizons, it can be tricky to check and track progress. This tool suggests assessment methods and metrics for different stages of a narrative change effort.

Emergent: Narrative Product	Developing: Narrative Presence	Advanced: Narrative Power	Achieved: Narrative Dominance
What it looks like: The desired narrative is expressed in an observable medium.	**What it looks like:** The desired narrative is widely available, regularly accessed, and emotionally resonant.	**What it looks like:** The desired narrative forces a change in decision-making and/or material reality.	**What it looks like:** The desired narrative becomes the dominant narrative, achieving goals for changing mindsets and systems.
Ways to assess *Narrative outputs.* What has been created? *Narrative form.* Do outputs use narrative/ story form? *Narrative fidelity.* How closely do outputs follow the desired narrative?	**Ways to assess** *Narrative reach.* How many impressions? *Narrative targets.* Is the narrative reaching strategically prioritized audiences? *Narrative reception.* How do audiences respond to the narrative?	**Ways to assess** *Narrative salience.* Is the narrative in influential settings/channels? *Narrative spread.* Has it been picked up organically by others? *Narrative impact.* Has the narrative sparked changes in mindsets, policies, practices, or resource flows?	**Ways to assess** *Narrative dominance.* How thoroughly has the counter-narrative replaced or marginalized the previously dominant narrative? *Narrative impacts.* How closely do systems match the aspirations of the counter-narrative?

Assessing Narrative Infrastructure

Narrative presence, power, and dominance can't be achieved unless essential capacities—called narrative infrastructure—are built and maintained. This tool suggests assessment methods and metrics to assess narrative infrastructure at various stages of an effort.

Emergent: Narrative Instincts	Developing: Narrative Networks	Advanced: Narrative Networks	Achieved: Narrative Infrastructure
What it looks like: Issue advocates recognize and articulate the need for narrative change.	**What it looks like:** Initial networks of individuals and organizations working on narrative change.	**What it looks like:** Strong and well-connected networks of individuals and organizations working on narrative change.	**What it looks like:** A robust system of resources, capacities, and partnerships for effective narrative change.
Ways to assess Interviews with issue advocates, analysis of nonprofit convenings, trade press, and other sites of field conversations.	**Ways to assess** Mapping of existing networks, analysis of collaborations and partnerships, and assessment of resource sharing.	**Ways to assess** Mapping of networks, analysis of collaboration effectiveness, and assessment of resource mobilization.	**Ways to assess** Analysis of narrative presence, power, and dominance; assessment of public opinion and policy shifts; and evaluation of long-term impact.

Steps in Creating a Strategic Plan for Funding Narrative Change

To develop a strategic plan for funding narrative change that is effective, efficient, and aligned with your philanthropic goals, consider these steps:

1. **Define goals and objectives:**
   - Identify desired outcomes: Clearly articulate the desired changes in public mindsets and systems change, identifying long-term benchmarks
   - Identify target audiences: Determine who needs to be influenced by the new narratives to move toward the desired outcomes.

2. **Conduct a narrative assessment:**
   - Analyze existing narratives: Identify dominant narratives, their sources, the primary platforms they're disseminated through, and their impact.
   - Assess public perceptions: Understand how different audiences respond to these narratives and if the narrative moves mindsets in productive directions.

3. **Support the backbone organization to develop a narrative strategy:**
   - Land on a compelling narrative: Use narrative research and analysis to identify, stretch, or develop a new narrative that moves target audiences toward desired outcomes.
   - Develop a plan for achieving strong narrative presence: Outline the channels and tactics for disseminating the new narrative.
   - Set shorter-term benchmarks (tied to tactics) that connect to the longer-term benchmarks.

4. **Support and build a narrative infrastructure:**
   - Identify key players: Determine which organizations and individuals can lead and contribute to the effort. Look for a central organization as well as a broader field that includes media organizations, cultural institutions, and NGOs.
   - Build narrative power where it does not yet exist by equipping people at the center of the new narrative to tell their stories in compelling, aligned ways.
   - Leverage narrative power where it already exists by supporting organizations to create partnerships with influential storytellers and enlisting them in the effort.
   - Weave the network: Convene and catalyze cross-organization, cross-sector initiatives and invest in the practices and structures that foster collaboration.
   - Allocate resources: Determine the funding needed for research, creation, dissemination, and evaluation.

5. **Fund the key players to implement the strategy:**
   - Support the organizations to launch initiatives and tactics: Begin implementing the planned activities and campaigns.
   - Support organizations to monitor progress: Track progress toward goals and make adjustments as needed.
   - Support organizations to evaluate impact: Assess the effectiveness of the narrative change efforts.

6. Support the sustainability of the implementation:

- Create a long-term plan: Develop a strategy for maintaining the new narrative over time.

- Strengthen narrative infrastructure: Ensure that ecosystems and organizations have the capacity (skills and resources) needed to continue the effort.

- Foster sustainability: Explore ways to integrate narrative change into the long-term plans of organizations.

Potential Partnerships for Narrative Change Efforts

While a central backbone organization is often important to a narrative change effort, it's also vital to engage and support a wider network. By supporting the central organizations to engage organizations like these, philanthropists can breathe life into an ecosystem for narrative change:

1. **Media Organizations:**

- **News outlets:** Local, national, and international news outlets can disseminate new narratives through their reporting and commentary.

- **Documentary filmmakers:** Documentaries can provide in-depth exploration of issues and inspire change.

- **Journalists:** Journalists can write articles, op-eds, and investigative reports that shape public opinion.

- **Cultural influencers:** Social media and other influencers can reach large audiences and promote new narratives through their content.

2. **Entertainment Industry:**

- **Film studios:** Film studios can produce movies that address important social issues.

- **Television networks:** Television networks can create shows and documentaries that promote new narratives.

- **Music artists:** Musicians can use their platforms to raise awareness and inspire change.

3. **Cultural Institutions:**

- **Museums:** Art museums, history museums, zoos, aquariums, and science centers can curate exhibitions and programs that tell new stories.

- **Theaters:** Theaters can stage plays and other artistic performances that address important issues.

- **Libraries:** Libraries can provide access to information, develop programming, host exhibits, convene conversations, and provide other resources related to the narrative change effort.

4. **Nonprofits:**

- **Advocacy groups:** NGOs can advocate for policy changes and raise awareness of important issues.

- **Community-based organizations:** Community-based organizations can connect with local communities and amplify their voices.

- **Think tanks:** Think tanks can conduct research and provide analysis to support narrative change efforts.
- **Academic institutions:** Universities can conduct and disseminate research, educate students, provide expertise, and serve as a space for student mobilization.

5. **Public Sector:**
   - **Public agencies:** Government agencies can use public relations strategies to shape public opinion.
   - **Policymakers:** Policymakers can create and drive policies that support narrative change efforts.

Staffing a Narrative Change Initiative: An NGO's Perspective

An NGO or coalition looking to implement a narrative change initiative should consider staffing the team with individuals who possess a diverse range of skills and expertise. The specific staffing needs will depend on the scale and complexity of the narrative change initiative. However, a diverse and skilled team is essential for success.

Here are some key roles to consider:

1. **Narrative Strategist:**
   - Develops and leads the overall narrative strategy
   - Attends to narrative intelligence and narrative infrastructure
   - Manages partnerships with storytellers, cultural producers, and researchers

2. **Research Analyst:**
   - Collects and analyzes audience data
   - Engages team in using data to adjust plans and tactics
   - Manages partnerships with mindset researchers and narrative researchers

3. **Content Creator:**
   - Develops and creates stories based on an evidence-based narrative
   - Writes scripts, articles, and social media posts
   - Collaborates with media professionals (partners or consultants)

4. **Communications Specialist:**
   - Manages media relations
   - Handles social media and digital marketing
   - Coordinates with external partners

5. **Community Engagement Coordinator:**
   - Outreach to target audiences
   - Organizes events and workshops
   - Builds relationships with community leaders

6. **Evaluation Specialist:**
- Tracks progress and measures impact
- Develops evaluation tools and metrics
- Analyzes data and reports findings

In addition to these core roles, the NGO may also need to hire or contract with experts in specific areas, such as:
- Graphic designers
- Videographers
- Copywriters
- Cultural consultants
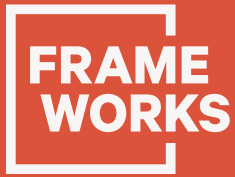- Public relations specialists

About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multidisciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

Learn more at www.frameworksinstitute.org

Endnotes

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