

Narrative Change

A Review of Concepts, Frameworks, and Approaches



SUMMARY

Narrative change has become an increasingly widespread approach among those seeking social change, including activists, policy advocates, and funders.

Narratives shape how people perceive and understand the world around them, and they provide meaning and a lens through which to interpret issues, causes, and events in the lives of individuals. Changing narratives could influence how individuals understand the world and their place in it and, as a result, narratives are powerful. They are also products of power as they often reflect dominant paradigms and reinforce the beliefs and values of the majority. When narratives resonate at an individual or collective level, they can motivate action and, in some cases, lead to social change.

This report reviews concepts, frameworks, and ideas from a range of sources to gain a deeper understanding of the types of change that are being addressed through narrative change efforts, the actors involved and their respective roles, and the vehicles of change that are available to those doing narrative change work. It covers a range of sources from different literatures, with a focus on synthesizing insights from the proliferating gray literature around narrative change coming from the social impact sector, as well as sharing implications for narrative change from the literature on social movements, narrative persuasion, and storytelling for social change. These insights speak to five key questions relevant to building the field's understanding of narrative change:

- 1. What is narrative change?** This section provides some foundational definitions for concepts related to narrative change.
- 2. How do narratives change?** This section explores the processes by which narratives themselves change, over time and at different levels: from stability to disruption to the emergence of new narratives.
- 3. What is the role of narrative change in social change?** This section situates narrative change within broader social movement and policy change processes, seeking to better articulate narrative's role in these processes and elucidate potential intersections between narrative and other forms of social activation and change.
- 4. What makes narratives resonant?** This section speaks to the features and characteristics of narratives that are most likely to impact audiences in desired ways, including what makes narratives feel engaging, credible, and meaningful to those encountering them.
- 5. What does it take to change narratives?** This section speaks to the range of approaches and activities for narrative change being used in the social change sector—including consideration of media, cultural, and power building approaches—and what we know so far about “what works” and what is still needed.
- 6. What types of change are relevant to narrative strategies?** This section describes different types of outcomes that may be relevant to narrative change strategies, from the individual to the institutional and societal level, and offers some considerations for strengthening our understanding of change.

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WHAT IS NARRATIVE CHANGE?

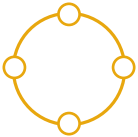
Defining narrative change has been a persistent challenge within the social change field. Recognizing this, there has been an effort to identify areas of consensus and alignment within the field, with experts proposing the following definitions of concepts related to narrative change:¹



Stories have or imply a beginning, a middle, and an end and 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 both.



Narrative Change is a change in the narratives that circulate within public discourse: either in the set of narratives in circulation (i.e. which narratives are used) or in their relative prevalence (i.e. which narratives are used more or less frequently), or both.



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. 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.

¹ Manne, L., Cheyfitz, K., de Vries, M., Lowell, D., Pariser, E., Potts, E., & Williams Simon, E. (2022). *Narrative Strategy: The Basics*. Liz Manne Strategy. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6001b70b59882814f5d98d43/t/622798c2a30582425338c3ef/1646762181816/Narrative_Strategy_The_Basics.pdf

Some other concepts that are often invoked in the narrative change field include the following:

- **Mindsets:** The Frameworks Institute defines mindsets as “deep, assumed patterns of thinking that make sense of the world and what we do, that can alternately normalize or problematize aspects of the existing social order.”² They also note how these are often mobilized to either justify or contest power relations.
- **Deep narratives:** Lynn and Kathlene define deep narratives (sometimes also referred to as metanarratives) as “the unquestioned ‘truths’ that have been normalized by society and feel like common sense, but can uphold systemic oppression.”³ In practice, deep narratives are often thought of as the narratives that underlie and reinforce multiple issue-specific narratives (individualism, deservingness, and scarcity are common examples).
- **Narrative systems:** Race Forward defines a narrative system as “a set of deep narratives that together describe the worldview we want to activate at a majority level. A narrative system provides a ‘destination’ to ground narrative projects ranging from rapid-response and policy campaigns to cultural strategies and longer-term narrative work.”⁴ The idea of creating a narrative system, much like the function of deep narratives themselves, is to pursue narrative alignment across multiple issues or campaigns, such that individual narrative projects “pull together” rather than working at odds.
- **Narrative power:** Increasingly, narrative practitioners are thinking and talking about narrative change in terms of building narrative power. Million Voters Project and Power California define narrative power building as “the long-term effort by organizing groups to advance racial and social justice by building the alignment, power, and collective infrastructure needed to advance, reinforce, and defend . . . desired narratives at scale.”⁵

Underlying these concepts is the belief, articulated by the Pop Culture Collaborative, that widespread cultural change can be achieved when millions of people are immersed in “oceans” of narratives, as a result of coordinated, multimodal storytelling and community organizing that expresses diverse perspectives all with the same set of core ideas.⁶

As is evident, while there are many disparate terms currently at play in the field, most are broadly analogous with one another and draw on similar—or even overlapping—underlying concepts. The Frameworks Institute recommends thinking about a “concept family” as opposed to over-focusing on specific terminology and definitions, noting that “including all of these closely related concepts within the overarching concept avoids getting into esoteric disagreements that are not practically useful for social change work. Using similarities to knit together a common construct enables us to draw on a broad repertoire of scholarship and practice in elaborating what mindset [or narrative] shift efforts are about.”⁷

2 Frameworks Institute. (2020). *Mindset shifts: What are they? Why do they matter? How do they happen?* (A Frameworks Strategic Report). <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/FRAJ8064-Mindset-Shifts-200612-WEB.pdf>

3 Lynn, J., & Kathlene, L. (2020). *Narrative change for health & racial equity: Exploring capacity & alignment*. PolicySolve, LLC. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346811466_NARRATIVE_CHANGE_FOR_HEALTH_RACIAL_EQUITY_EXPLORING_CAPACITY_ALIGNMENT

4 Race Forward. (2022). *An Introduction to the Narrative System and the Narrative Ecosystem*. <https://www.raceforward.org/sites/default/files/Narrative-System-Ecosystem.pdf>

5 Million Voters Project and Power California. (2024). *Narrative Power: Accelerating Narrative Change from the Ground Up*. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63602590e29759277c27fcbf/t/65bc06d740b1543b6b35d362/1706821349400/MVP-Million-Voters-Project-Accelerating+Narrative+Change+From+the+Ground+Up.pdf>

6 Van Slyke, T. (2022). *Narrative Infrastructure for Narrative Immersion*. Pop Culture Collaborative.

7 Frameworks Institute. (2020). *Mindset shifts: What are they? Why do they matter? How do they happen?* (A Frameworks Strategic Report). <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/FRAJ8064-Mindset-Shifts-200612-WEB.pdf>

How are narratives different than stories, frames, and short-term messaging?

Narratives are often confused with stories, framing, and short-term messaging, and depending on the context, narrative change can involve changing the frame, culture, attitudes, and mindsets.⁸

Framing is about meaning construction, and a frame is the lens through which we interpret and label events and occurrences as meaningful. They help us make sense of our experiences and guide our actions. It is through the word “frame” that we also get the word “framework.” A story refers to a narrative form or structure that has a plot (or storyline) and a point of view. Stories have lessons and morals, and how a story is arranged and its components, including characters, the plot, and the setting, can help us understand and shape our reality. Storytelling for social change involves shifting power away from the dominant culture and changing the point of view to disrupt the status quo. Short-term messaging, on the other hand, is often developed by communications and marketing professionals, and it is about consistently and strategically getting out the right message at the right time. Traditionally, messaging relied on sound bites and news cycles, but in the digital age, it may involve social media campaigns and memes that can go viral. Table 1 summarizes these terms based on description and purpose.

Table 1 | Key Terms Related to Narrative

TERM	DESCRIPTION	PURPOSE
Narrative	Patterns of stories that contain central themes or beliefs about how the world works	Can explain why things are the way they are and justify the existing order, or they can be used to question the existing order
Framing	The lens through which we interpret and make meaning of events and experiences	Provides guidance on how we think about issues and problems
Story	Narrative form with a plot, characters, setting, and a point of view	A way to share lessons and morals and to remember our experiences
Short-term messaging	Consistent strategic communication of key messages at the right time	Influences opinions and behaviors in the near term

8 Davidson, B. (2016). *Narrative change and the Open Society Public Health Program*. https://askjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/20160711_Narrative-change-paper-1.pdf

HOW DO NARRATIVES CHANGE?

Fink and Yolles describe the process of narrative change in the context of paradigms, laying out the stages of narrative change in terms of what happens to the narrative itself in this process of changing.⁹ In this framework, paradigms are defined as dominant worldviews, and paradigm shifts entail a radical change in the dominant worldview, involving radical shifts in existing assumptions and beliefs, and the adoption of new paradigms¹⁰—similar to how narrative is currently described in the field.

They describe the process of narrative change in four modes, described in detail in Figure 1. **Mode 1** is a relatively stable state for paradigms and their narratives. Through the framing function, a dominant paradigm determines “legitimate” goals. In **Mode 2**, critical questions emerge. If stories are labeled as inaccurate or irrelevant, tensions increase and reach a critical state in which meanings are contested. The paradigm and its stories move away from a state of equilibrium. In **Mode 3**, different types of stories merge, and emergent groups may challenge dominant paradigms and their framings. At the **Trifurcation** stage, paradigms diverge into three paths: (1) new paradigms may arise; (2) some paradigms may decline and die; (3) other paradigms may be reborn with adaptations and changes. In **Mode 4**, transformation-narratives aligned with new paradigms are defined with a new vision and goals. Out of this process, new narratives that align with new paradigms may emerge, and others may change along with adapted paradigms.

Paradigms are dominant worldviews, and paradigm shifts entail a radical, periodic change in the dominant worldview. A paradigm shift involves a reassessment of existing assumptions and beliefs and the adoption of a new paradigm.

To learn more about paradigms and paradigm shifts, see the following:

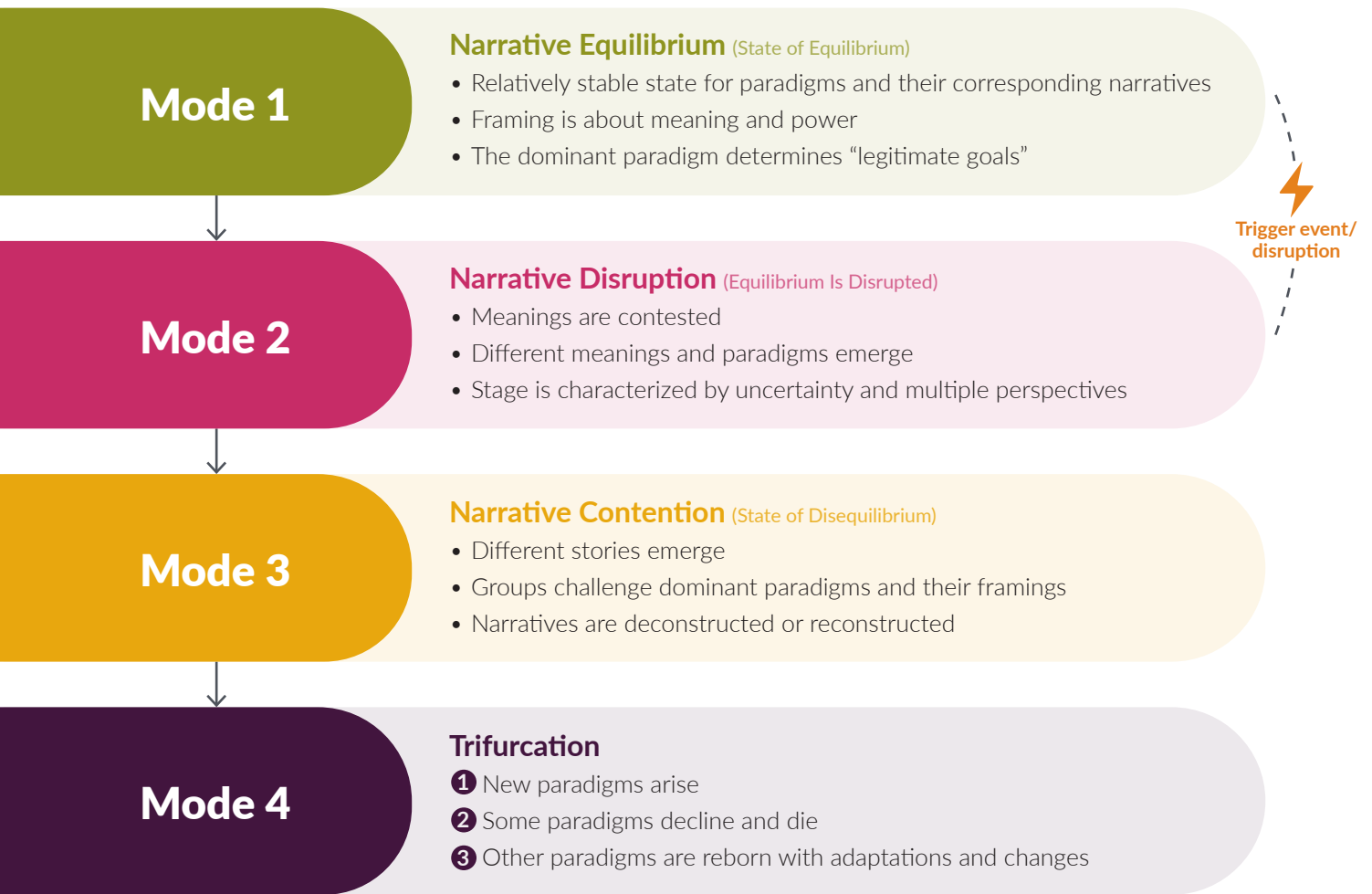
Kuhn, T. (2012). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hall, P. A. (1993). Policy Paradigms, Social Learning, and the State: The Case of Economic Policymaking in Britain. *Comparative Politics*, 25(3), 275-296.

⁹ Fink, G., & Yolles, M. (2012). Narratives, paradigms and change—the issue of relevance. *European Journal of Cross-Cultural Competence and Management*, 2(3-4), 191-208.

¹⁰ Kuhn, T. (2012). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. University of Chicago Press; Hall, P. A. (1993). Policy Paradigms, Social Learning, and the State: The Case of Economic Policymaking in Britain. *Comparative Politics*, 25(3), 275-296.

Figure 1 | Process of Narrative Change



This theoretical model suggests that a narrative strategy may lead to a higher likelihood of narrative change when a large-scale disruptive event occurs or when many people in a society are experiencing the same cultural moment at the same time. Building the kind of networks and infrastructure needed for narrative change over time will place those engaged in narrative change work in a better position to take advantage of these moments to seed new or changed narrative paradigms, building on instances or situations when established narratives are disrupted, meanings are contested, and different perspectives, stories, and paradigms are emerging. We return to what this infrastructure might look like in Section 5: What does it take to change narratives?

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF NARRATIVE CHANGE IN SOCIAL CHANGE?

While there is little in the existing literature on the stages of narrative change at the societal level, more is known about the stages of movements for social change, in which narratives can play a significant role. Here, we consider the intersections of narrative change with collective action and social movements: narratives have the potential to contest dominant paradigms when movements first emerge and in subsequent stages as groups challenge dominant narratives and their framings.

Public narratives and collective action

Marshall Ganz, a long-time civil rights organizer turned sociologist, presents a framework through which to understand the role and importance of public narratives in motivating collective action. According to Ganz, “public narrative is a leadership practice of translating values into action. It is based on the fact that values are experienced emotionally. . . . Narrative is the discursive means we use to access values that equip us with the courage to make choices under conditions of uncertainty [and] to exercise agency.”¹¹ Narrative seeks to answer the why question—why it matters, why we should care, and why we must act. Emotions and values are closely tied, and emotion can be the mechanism through which values motivate or inspire action. Ganz explains that “storytelling is the discursive form through which we translate our values into the motivation to act.”¹² A story has a plot, a character (or characters), and a moral.

Leadership on behalf of social change often requires telling a new public story or adapting an old one. Ganz refers to this framework as a story of self, a story of us, and a story of now. Figure 2 provides a summary of these stories.

11 Ganz, M. (2011). Public narrative, collective action, and power. *Accountability through public opinion: From inertia to public action*, 273-289.

12 Ganz, M. (2011). Public narrative, collective action, and power. *Accountability through public opinion: From inertia to public action*, 273-289.

- The **story of self** communicates through storytelling the values that aim to connect at an emotional level. It is “a way to share the values that define who you are—not as abstract principles, but as lived experience. We construct stories of self around choice points—moments when we faced a challenge, made a choice, experienced an outcome, and learned a moral.”
- The **story of us** weaves together the shared experiences and values of a larger group or community. Just as individuals have stories, communities, movements, organizations, and nations tell collective stories that teach morals about how we should act and live and help us distinguish who “we” are from “others.” In this regard, cultures can be seen as “repositories of stories” about our values, shared goals, and collective identities. Successful communication of a “story of us” requires a storyteller as an interpreter of shared experiences and values.
- The **story of now** articulates the pressing challenge to those shared experiences and values and the need for urgent action. It conveys “the challenges we face now, the choices we are called upon to make, and the meaning of making the right choice.” We are the protagonists in these stories. We face a crisis or major challenge, and we are called upon to make “the right choice.”

Figure 2 | Self, Us, Now



Source: Ganz, M. (2011). Public narrative, collective action, and power. *Accountability through public opinion: From inertia to public action*, 273-289.

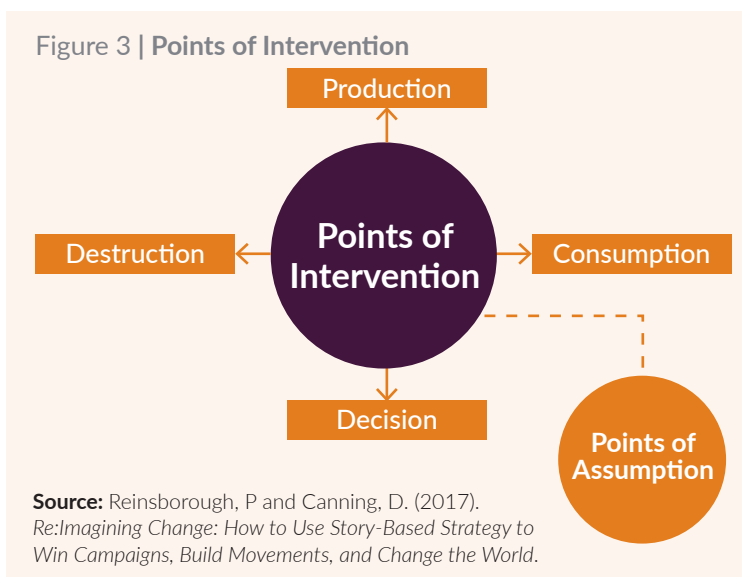
Narrative Power Analysis

Narrative Power Analysis (NPA) is part of a larger story-based strategy for achieving social change, and it asserts that we as humans are made of stories.¹³ We use stories to process information we encounter in our daily lives, and we remember our lived experiences by converting them into stories that assign meaning to those experiences. In that sense, stories operate within the context and currency of meaning more than truth. NPA draws on the work of Antonio Gramsci, who developed the concept of hegemony to describe how the elite not only physically rule over society but also define a society’s norms and values through a hegemonic culture in which the values of the elite become the values of all. Hegemony operates in cultural stories that gain acceptance over time and reinforce a dominant perspective or worldview. NPA critically examines dominant-culture stories, considers how power shapes the point of view of a story, and explores how a story normalizes the status quo. Thus, people may have internalized dominant-culture stories to the extent that they may not be able to hear social change messages or stories.

An NPA approach can help practitioners understand the story they are trying to change and recognize not only the underlying assumptions that allow that story to operate as truth but also the points of intervention where users can challenge, change, or insert a new story. NPA identifies the elements of a story as conflict, characters, imagery, foreshadowing, and assumptions. To win the “battle of the story,” NPA provides this tool to help deconstruct stories that uphold the status quo and support change agents as they construct new stories.

According to NPA, framing is about the issue of power in the story, and it involves the task of developing a narrative with characters, conflicts, images, and foreshadowing that reinforces a good story and creates meaning for an audience. Story-based strategy explores who does and does not have power in the story, with the aim of shifting power within and through the story. Points of intervention are the places within a system where taking action can make change. Whereas social movements have a long history of taking action where production, consumption, destruction, and decision making are happening, story-based strategy provides the tools and resources to help change agents take action at the point of assumption where meanings around power in a story are made and remade through the process of framing and reframing. Figure 3 shows the Points of Intervention using a story-based strategy.

While the traditional four points of intervention are in the physical space, the point of assumption operates in the space of meanings and narratives. Actions in this space have the goal of questioning assumptions and changing the story or narrative: “shifting the debate, moving the center of gravity, and changing the story are all metaphors to describe a cultural shift that creates the space for political changes to emerge.”¹⁴ According to NPA, a story-based strategy is an exploration of how social movements can use narrative to create a shared story for interpreting political issues that inform and shape the understanding of a critical mass of society.



13 Reinsborough, P., & Canning, D. (2017). *Re:Imagining Change: How to Use Story-Based Strategy to Win Campaigns, Build Movements, and Change the World*. PM Press.

14 Reinsborough, P., & Canning, D. (2017). *Re:Imagining Change: How to Use Story-Based Strategy to Win Campaigns, Build Movements, and Change the World*. PM Press.

Stages of social movements and their intersections with narrative

Social movement theory also has implications for understanding and implementing narrative change. Blumer identified four stages of social movements, including social ferment, popular excitement, formalization, and institutionalization.¹⁵ They have since been renamed: (1) Emergence; (2) Coalescence; (3) Bureaucratization; and (4) Decline. Christiansen provides an overview of the four stages.¹⁶

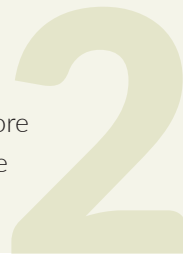
Emergence

This preliminary stage of social movements is characterized by widespread discontent and little to no organization. While potential movement participants may be unhappy about a policy or social condition, they have not yet taken action to address their grievances. If any action is taken at this stage, it is most likely individual rather than collective. During this stage, social movement organizations (SMOs), which carry out the tasks for any social movement to survive and be successful, may serve as agitators to raise consciousness around issues and stir up discontent in the general population.



Coalescence

During this stage, beliefs about who or what may be responsible for policies or social conditions that are causing unrest may emerge. Discontent progresses from the individual level to become more coordinated, collective, and strategic. Leaders emerge and begin to develop strategies for collective action, including mass demonstrations.



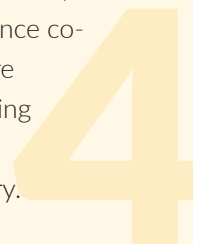
Bureaucratization

The third stage is characterized by higher levels of organization and coalition-based strategies. Social movements have had some success in raising public awareness, and there is a growing realization that a coordinated strategy is needed across SMOs. In this stage, social movements have progressed beyond mass demonstrations, and they rely on trained staff at SMOs to develop and implement movement goals. Social movements that fail to bureaucratize may fizzle out whereas those that do reach this stage generally increase their political power due in part to greater access to political elites. With bureaucratization or formalization, paid staff can fill in when the demands for continued mobilization in the movement become too onerous for volunteers.



Decline

Though referred to as Decline, this stage does not mean failure for all social movements. In some cases, authorities may use measures to control or destroy a social movement. Other movements experience co-optation in which movement leaders begin to associate with authorities or movement targets more than with movement constituencies. Some movements decline once they are successful in achieving their goals whereas others fail due to organizational or strategic failures of SMOs. Yet others decline when their goals are adopted by the mainstream, and the movement is no longer necessary.



¹⁵ Blumer, H. (1951). Social Movements. In Lee, A. M. (ed.), *Principles of Sociology*, 199-220. Barnes & Noble.

¹⁶ Christiansen, J. (2011). Four Stages of Social Movements. In The Editors of Salem Press (eds.), *Theories of Social Movements*, 14-25. Salem Press.

While not explicitly addressed in the literature, narratives have the potential to contest dominant paradigms in **Stage 1 (Emergence)**, which corresponds to Mode 2 (when dominant paradigms and their corresponding narratives are disrupted) in Fink and Yolles's cycle of narrative change. **Stage 2 (Coalescence)** corresponds with Mode 3 (when different stories emerge, and groups challenge dominant narratives and their framings). There are opportunities during these two stages not only to challenge dominant worldviews but also to shape how people perceive the world around them and interpret issues, causes, and events.

Stage 3 (Bureaucratization) is the point at which movement leaders realize a coordinated strategy is needed across SMOs for maximum social impact. This is the stage at which organizations working on narrative change may realize the need to come together to coordinate action and assess alignment on goals, strategies, and values. Organizations may seek to strengthen their capacity in doing this work by hiring staff who specialize in narrative change and communications strategy. During this stage, they may also seek to cultivate relationships and partnerships among the political elite, including government officials. Working with one another and their supporters, SMOs may be successful during this stage in changing the narrative on a social issue, which corresponds to Mode 4 (when new narratives that align with new paradigms may emerge, and others may change along with adapted paradigms).

In Stage 4 (Decline), some narratives fade away along with failed movements. Other narratives, which may have been useful for achieving specific goals within a movement, may have a limited influence or impact on the culture. Other narratives may be adopted by mainstream culture and become part of the dominant paradigm, which then corresponds with Mode 1 (when paradigms and their corresponding narratives are in a state of equilibrium). They may remain in this relatively stable state until the next time that dominant paradigms and their narratives are disrupted.

While the four stages of social movements can be useful as an analytic tool, Christiansen notes that it is a tool that applies better to movements geared toward political change, whereas some movements may emerge "in response to cultural and social issues."¹⁷



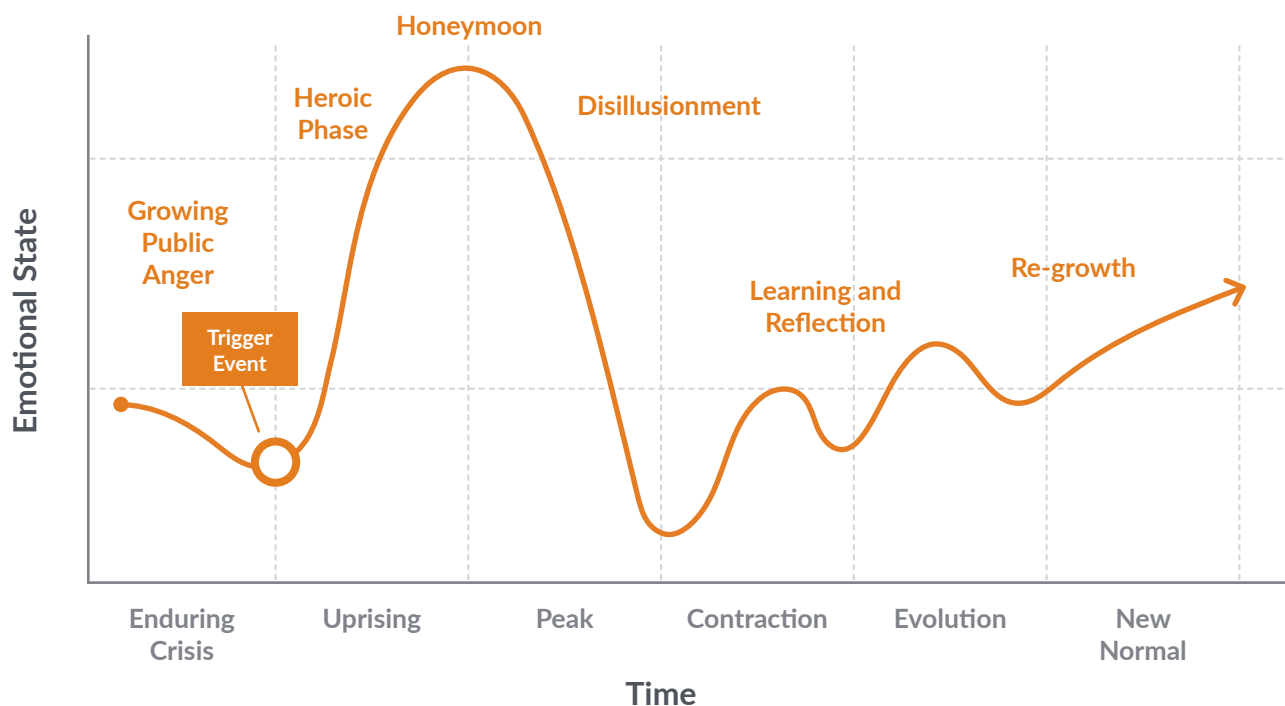
¹⁷ Christiansen, J. Four Stages of Social Movements. In The Editors of Salem Press (eds.), *Theories of Social Movements*, 14-25. Salem Press.

The movement cycle

Work to support large-scale protests that shift public opinion around social issues can also benefit from learning about movement cycles and what movements need and at what time.¹⁸ Movements operate in cycles, as illustrated in Figure 4. Trigger events may lead to peak moments of collective mobilization, but it is during the slower, quieter times that much of the organizing and capacity building takes place to consolidate movement gains and lay the groundwork for when new opportunities arise.

A trigger event is a galvanizing incident or occurrence, such as a national tragedy, pandemic, or historic court ruling, that helps activists and organizers reframe an issue and engage newly interested people in their cause. After periods of growth and excitement, there is generally a time of disillusionment and retraction, as downturns are an inevitable part of social movements. Receiving the right type of support at the right time in the cycle can make a difference between a movement that fades away and one that sustains over the long term. What is needed during trigger events is training and support for volunteers. As trigger events wind down, a shift to absorption strategies that engage new and committed volunteers in the longer term movement is necessary. These shifts may also present opportunities for narrative change.

Figure 4 | The Movement Cycle



Based on a chart by Movement NetLab

18 Saavedra, C. (2018). Five Ways Funders Can Support Social Movements. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. https://ssir.org/articles/entry/five_ways_funders_can_support_social_movements#

Synthesis: mapping movement stages to narrative change processes

Stage 1

Emergence | Trigger Event | Narrative Disruption

- Dominant paradigms and their corresponding narratives are disrupted.
- Individuals begin to question and challenge prevailing narratives and paradigms.

Stage 2

Coalescence | Narrative Contention | Movement Cycle: Heroic Phase and Honeymoon

- Different stories emerge, and groups challenge prevailing narratives and their framings.
- Discontent progresses from the individual level to become more coordinated and collective.
- Mass demonstrations may occur during this stage of peak mobilization.

Stage 3

Bureaucratization | Narrative Change | Movement Cycle: Disillusionment

- Social movement organizations realize the need to coordinate narratives and strategies, and they may build capacity and partnerships to change narratives on a broader scale.
- They coordinate efforts; they may be successful in changing the narrative on a social issue.
- New narratives that align with new paradigms may emerge, and others may change along with adapted paradigms.
- It is during this time after peak mobilization when the excitement has died down that funders can support movement organizations so they can regroup and build on the gains that were made.

Stage 4

Decline | Narrative Decline & Equilibrium | Movement Cycle: Learning & Reflection, Regrowth (for some)

- Movements decline for different reasons. Some narratives fade away along with failed movements, and other narratives may be adopted by the mainstream culture and become part of the dominant paradigm.
- Movements that are supported by funders during the Disillusionment stage have a greater likelihood of making it to the Learning & Reflection stage and to Regrowth so that they have the capacity and infrastructure to take advantage of when the next galvanizing incident occurs.

Narrative and policy change

Finally, it may also be helpful to conceptualize the role of narratives in other forms of large-scale systems change, in particular policy change (which is often a stated goal of narrative change efforts). Another theoretical framework that is grounded in the use of narrative is the Narrative Policy Framework (NFP), which seeks to help researchers make sense of the policy process and examines the capacity for narratives to shape public policy at multiple levels of analysis.¹⁹ In the NFP, the authors identify three levels of analysis in which narratives can play a role. At the **Micro (individual) level**, the focus is on the individual and how individuals inform and are informed by policy narratives. At the **Meso (group) level**, the focus is on the policy narratives deployed by policy actors who participate in the groups, coalitions, and organizations that compose the policy subsystem. At the **Macro (cultural and institutional) level**, the focus is on how policy narratives that are embedded in cultures and institutions shape public policy.

In addition to an assumption that narratives operate at three interacting levels, NFP assumes that meanings around social policy are socially constructed and that humans prefer to think and speak in the form of stories. Meanings can vary, but this variation is bounded by belief systems and ideologies, and thus maintains some stability over time. NFP identifies specific core elements of policy narratives that include the setting, characters, plot, and moral of the story as well as narrative strategies that can be used to influence the policy process.

To learn more about the Narrative Policy Framework, see the following:

Jones, M. D., & McBeth, M. K. (2010). A narrative policy framework: Clear enough to be wrong?. *Policy studies journal*, 38(2), 329-353.

Shanahan, E. A., Jones, M. D., McBeth, M. K., & Radaelli, C. M. (2018). *The narrative policy framework*. In *Theories of the policy process*, 173-213. Routledge.

Jones, M. D., McBeth, M. K., & Shanahan, E. A. (2014). Introducing the narrative policy framework. In *The science of stories: Applications of the narrative policy framework in public policy analysis*, 1-25. Palgrave Macmillan US.

Shanahan, E. A., Jones, M. D., & McBeth, M. K. (2018). How to conduct a Narrative Policy Framework study. *The Social Science Journal*, 55(3), 332-345.

Considering tipping points

Narrative changes at the individual level (in attitudes, beliefs, behavior, identity, and mindsets) can reach a tipping point at which the changes could result in a wide-scale change in culture or a movement at the collective level. Researchers found that when a minority group reached a critical mass, they were able to overturn the established behavior and initiate a new social convention. The study demonstrated that committed minorities with a size of approximately 25% of the population could successfully bring about social change.²⁰ The study cites other research that puts the tipping point range at anywhere between 10%–40%.

At the other end of the spectrum, changes at the collective level that result in a change in culture can dictate what is regarded as appropriate behaviors, norms, and values, which could then alter behaviors, norms, and values at the individual level. In a review article on the cultural impacts of social movements, Amenta and Polletta have shown that ideas, values, and language produced by movements can gain a place in people's everyday conversations, decision making, and interaction.²¹ More needs to be learned, however, about how and when ideas get diffused in informal ways outside of formal institutions. In the face of a wide-scale social movement, some people may choose to conform whereas others may resist.

19 Jones, M. D., & McBeth, M. K. (2010). A narrative policy framework: Clear enough to be wrong? *Policy Studies Journal*, 38(2), 329-353.

20 Centola, D., Becker, J., Brackbill, D., & Baronchelli, A. (2018). Experimental evidence for tipping points in social convention. *Science*, 360(6393), 1116-1119.

21 Amenta, E., & Polletta, F. (2019). The cultural impacts of social movements. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 45, 279-299.

WHAT MAKES NARRATIVES RESONANT?

If narratives are a means to change people's assumptions and understandings of the world, they need to resonate with their audiences on multiple levels and provide a compelling interpretation of the present and vision for the future. As Harding, Dobson, Wyse, and Morenoff contend, when structural constraints or barriers challenge or contradict personal narratives, this may inhibit their stability and effectiveness.²² They note: "Particularly for marginalized groups with limited access to the means with which to realize narrative prescriptions and who face numerous structural constraints, the potential incompatibility of personal narratives with daily experiences raises questions about the capacity of narratives to influence behavior and decision-making"—and this question of resonance also has implications for societal-level narratives.

Frames and framing processes

Within the social movements literature, there is a focus on frames, framing processes, and the idea of **framing as meaning construction**. The concept of frame derives from the work of Erving Goffman. For Goffman, frames denoted "schemata of interpretation" that enable individuals "to locate, perceive, identify, and label" occurrences within their lives and the world at large.²³ It is through frames that we label events and occurrences as meaningful and, as a result, they help make sense of our experiences and guide our actions.²⁴ Collective action frames are important in understanding how social change efforts communicate their goals and ideas to gain support. The resonance of these frames, or how well they connect with people, can vary greatly. **Resonance** is affected by two main factors: credibility and salience.

Credibility has three parts: frame consistency, empirical credibility, and the credibility of the person or group communicating the frame. Frame consistency means that a movement's beliefs, claims, and actions align. When there are inconsistencies, it can make the frame less effective. Empirical credibility is about how well the frame's claims match real-world events. Even if a claim isn't universally believable, it must be believable to some people for it to be effective. Finally, credibility is also affected by the perceived trustworthiness of the person or group promoting the frame.

Salience refers to how relevant a frame is to the people it's targeting. Three aspects affect salience: centrality, experiential commensurability, and narrative fidelity. Centrality is how important the beliefs, values, and ideas of a movement are to the target audience. Experiential commensurability means the frame's ideas match the personal experiences of the target audience. Lastly, narrative fidelity is how well the frame connects with the cultural stories and myths of the audience. If a frame has strong narrative fidelity, it will be more effective in mobilizing people. Narrative fidelity, or "cultural resonance," asks the question: To what extent are the framings culturally resonant?²⁵

22 Harding, D. J., Dobson, C. C., Wyse, J. J., & Morenoff, J. D. (2017). Narrative change, narrative stability, and structural constraint: The case of prisoner reentry narratives. *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, 5, 261-304.

23 Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Harvard University Press.

24 Benford, R. D., & Snow, D. A. (2000). Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26(1), 611-639.

25 Benford, R. D., & Snow, D. A. (2000). Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment. *Annual review of Sociology*, 26(1), 611-639.

Table 2 describes adapted concepts from the literature on framing and framing processes; this elucidates characteristics that have implications for if and how narratives are likely to resonate with audiences.

Table 2 | Movement Stages

FACTORS AFFECTING RESONANCE (or how well frames connect with people)	COMPONENTS OF FACTORS	DESCRIPTION
Credibility (level of believability or trustworthiness attached to a frame)	Frame consistency	Level of alignment between a movement’s beliefs, claims, and actions
	Frame credibility	How well the frame’s claims match real-world events
	Messenger credibility	Perceived trustworthiness of the person or group promoting the frame
Salience (how relevant a frame is to the people it is targeting)	Movement centrality	How important the beliefs, values, and ideas of a movement are to the target audience
	Experiential alignment	The frame’s ideas match the personal experiences of the target audience
	Cultural fidelity (of the narrative)	How well the frame connects with the cultural stories and myths of the audience

William Gamson also writes about cultural resonance, noting that “some frames have a natural advantage because their ideas and language resonate with a broader political culture. Resonances increase the appeal of a frame by making it appear natural and familiar.”²⁶



To learn more about frames and framing processes, see the following:

- Benford, R. D., & Snow, D. A. (2000). Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26(1), 611-639.
- Snow, D. A., & Benford, R. D. (1988). Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization. *International Social Movement Research*, 1, 197-218.

26 Gamson, W. A. (1992). *Talking Politics*. Cambridge University Press.

Frame alignment

Frame alignment refers to the connection between individual and organizational interpretive orientations in social movements. It involves linking personal interests, values, and beliefs with broader social goals and ideology. Frames, or interpretive schemata, help individuals understand and label occurrences in their lives and the world. Frame alignment is crucial for participation in social change. There are different processes of frame alignment, such as frame bridging, which links ideologically congruent but structurally unconnected frames; frame amplification, which clarifies and strengthens interpretive frames; frame extension, which expands a movement's primary framework to include additional interests or viewpoints; and frame transformation, which involves redefining existing interpretive frames or creating new ones to garner support and participation. These processes are essential for mobilizing individuals and achieving movement goals.



To learn more about frame alignment, see the following:

Snow, D. A., Rochford Jr., E. B., Worden, S. K., & Benford, R. D. (1986). Frame alignment processes, micromobilization, and movement participation. *American Sociological Review*, 464-481.

Narrative persuasion and engagement

Researchers in the field of communications studies have developed data-based models that can be used to measure narrative persuasion and engagement. Some of these models may be especially helpful in understanding the potential resonance of narratives and their likelihood of persuading audiences.

Transportation-Imagery Model

The Transportation-Imagery Model posits that the degree to which individuals are "transported" into a narrative world is a key factor in narrative persuasion.²⁷ The model suggests that the more vivid the mental imagery and the greater the emotional involvement, the stronger the persuasive impact. Researchers can use surveys and experiments to measure transportation and its effects on persuasion outcomes, using items that ask audiences engaging with narrative content to rate the degree to which they could picture events and characters, felt immersed in the narrative, and felt the narrative had relevance to their experiences, among other items.

27 Green, M. C., & Brock, T. C. (2000). The role of transportation in the persuasiveness of public narratives. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79(5), 701-721.

Identification and Engagement Model

The Identification and Engagement Model focuses on the role of identification with media characters in narrative persuasion.²⁸ By measuring the degree of identification and its effects on persuasion outcomes, researchers can examine the importance of character identification in shaping narrative impact. Based on these dimensions and previous methods of measurement, the following items are suggested for measuring identification. Respondents may be asked to indicate their degree of agreement with the following statements, referring to a specific character in a specific TV show. These items could also be adapted for films or books:

1

While viewing program X, I felt as if I was part of the action.

2

While viewing program X, I forgot myself and was fully absorbed.

3

I was able to understand the events in the program in a manner similar to that in which character X understood them.

4

I think I have a good understanding of character X.

5

I tend to understand the reasons why character X does what he or she does.

6

While viewing the show I could feel the emotions character X portrayed.

7

During viewing, I felt I could really get inside character X's head.

8

At key moments in the show, I felt I knew exactly what character X was going through.

9

While viewing the program, I wanted character X to succeed in achieving his or her goals.

10

When character X succeeded, I felt joy, but when he or she failed, I was sad.

Source: Cohen, J. (2001). Defining Identification: A Theoretical Look at the Identification of Audiences with Media Characters. *Mass Communication & Society* 4, 245-264.

28 Cohen, J. (2001). Defining Identification: A Theoretical Look at the Identification of Audiences with Media Characters. *Mass Communication & Society* 4, 245-264.

Narrative Engagement Scale

The Narrative Engagement Scale describe four dimensions of narrative engagement that are interconnected and contribute to our overall engagement with narratives.²⁹ The first dimension is narrative understanding, which refers to how easily we comprehend and make sense of a story. The second dimension is attentional focus, where a truly engaged viewer is unaware of focused attention and only becomes aware if their attention drifts or needs refocusing. The third dimension is emotional engagement, which involves feeling for and with the characters in the story, representing emotional arousal rather than any specific emotions. Lastly, narrative presence is the sensation of leaving the real world and entering the story, characterized by intense focus and a feeling of being in another space and time



To learn more about how individuals relate to and model those they perceive as being similar to them, see the following:

Bandura, A. (2004). Health promotion by social cognitive means. *Health Education & Behavior*, 31(2), 143-164.

Moyer-Gusé, E., Chung, A. H., & Jain, P. (2011). Identification with characters and discussion of taboo topics after exposure to an entertainment narrative about sexual health. *Journal of Communication* 61(3), 387-406.

To learn more about how individuals seem to learn more from characters they like, want to be like, or feel as if they know, see the following:

Moyer-Gusé, E. (2008). Toward a Theory of Entertainment Persuasion: Explaining the Persuasive Effects of Entertainment-Education Messages. *Communication Theory*, 18(3), 407-425.

Slater, M. D., & Rouner, D. (2002). Entertainment Education and Elaboration Likelihood: Understanding the Processing of Narrative Persuasion. *Communication Theory*, 12, 173-191.

²⁹ Busselle, R., & Bilandzic, H. (2009). Measuring narrative engagement. *Media Psychology*, 12(4), 321-347.

Characteristics of beliefs about complex social issues

In seeking to understand what makes narratives resonant, it may also be helpful to better understand the content of people's beliefs about the social issues that we seek to change, so that they can be more effectively targeted by narrative interventions. Proposed by Green and de Vries, the three A's—Attitudes, Attribution, and Agency—add another dimension to understanding people's beliefs about complex social issues, such as poverty, the role of narratives, and the potential for developing more effective narrative change strategies.³⁰

Their review of both academic and applied research revealed three major dimensions of beliefs around poverty:

- **Attitudes** relate to how people feel about poverty and those in poverty.
- **Attribution** refers to people's understanding of the causes of poverty.
- **Agency** refers to whether people believe solutions to poverty exist, can be implemented, and whether they can influence what happens.

They note that while facts can be disputed, real stories and people's lived experiences are more difficult to dismiss and must be considered in narrative strategies. Moreover, they find that attribution is not the easiest path to changing people's minds about social issues (in this case, poverty). While the dominant theory from survey-based research suggests that attribution (or people's understanding of the causes of poverty) leads to certain attitudes (how people feel about poverty and those in poverty), they suggest that it is not necessary to change respondents' overall philosophy on the causes of poverty to move people toward more positive views of people experiencing poverty and increased support for policy solutions. Instead, increasing empathy, or helping people access their feelings of empathy, "may be an important key to unlocking action."

30 Green, J. & De Vries, M. (2021). *Measuring the Impacts of Poverty Narrative Change*. Liz Manne Strategy. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6001b70b59882814f5d98d43/t/6151e1062a80e646d377f42f/1632755981414/Measuring+the+Impacts+of+Poverty+Narrative+Change-Research+Frame-work+%26+Survey+Questions.pdf>

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO CHANGE NARRATIVES?

Currently, there is little empirical evidence of what works to drive narrative change. Much of the evidence that exists is based on interviews and surveys with narrative change leaders, practitioners, and funders in the narrative change space. Additionally, there are case studies on narrative change efforts that draw on secondary data sources and interviews with activists, advocates, and disciplinary experts. While in this section we suggest certain approaches, strategies, and activities that have likely contributed to narrative change or may have the potential to do so, more work needs to be done in the field to make the connections and links more rigorous between outcomes, strategies, actions, and goals.

Approaches to narrative change

The Convergence Partnership describes three critical vehicles for narrative change: mass media (shifting narratives through journalism and nonfiction media), mass culture (shifting narratives through storytelling in entertainment such as film and television), and mass movements (shifting narratives through organizing and collective action).³¹ They note that while philanthropic narrative change efforts have tended to focus on mass media and culture, “[w]e will not make significant change without building all three kinds of narrative power, hopefully operating in concert with each other for maximum impact.” In this section, we outline some of the different ways in which funders and practitioners have sought to approach narrative change, corresponding broadly to these categories of work.

Focusing on culture and cultural change

One large category of work in the narrative change field has been to focus on culture and cultural change. Focusing on culture or cultural change can have different connotations and involve different approaches.

Narrative change is linked to cultural change, and Moore and Sen note that some funders have been investing in artists and other cultural creators as “agents of social change.”³² If the arts and popular culture are seen as mediums for social change, then artists, writers, filmmakers, and musicians are the storytellers, and their stories are the vehicles for narrative change. The USC Norman Lear Center reviewed research on the power of entertainment to support narrative change and found that entertainment has the power and potential to change hearts and minds.³³ Important factors included acknowledging the diversity of viewers and their perceptions of the relevance of storylines and being thoughtful and intentional in supporting the infrastructure around media projects and their creators.

More broadly, some practitioners in the narrative change space believe that cultural work, as an integral part of shifting narratives, must be integrated into any narrative change work. Among people who work with grassroots organizations, there is a belief that cultural work must happen in partnership with community members who have authentic experiences and stories to share.³⁴ For others, cultural change might be more of a strategy, with narrative change as the means to make progress toward cultural change.

31 Moore, M., & Sen, R. (2022). *Funding Narrative Change: An assessment and framework by the Convergence Partnership*. <https://convergencepartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Funding-Narrative-Change.pdf>

32 Moore, M., & Sen, R. (2022). *Funding Narrative Change: An assessment and framework by the Convergence Partnership*. <https://convergencepartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Funding-Narrative-Change.pdf>

33 Korobkova, K., Weinstein, D., Felt, L., Rosenthal, E., & Blakley, J. (2023). *Lights, Camera, Impact: 20 Years of Research on the Power of Entertainment to Support Narrative Change*. USC Norman Lear Center Media Impact Project. <https://learcenter.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/NormanLearCenter-Narrative-Change-Research-Review.pdf>

34 Lynn, J., & Kathlene, L. (2020). *Narrative change for health & racial equity: Exploring capacity & alignment*. PolicySolve, LLC. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346811466_NARRATIVE_CHANGE_FOR_HEALTH_RACIAL_EQUITY_EXPLORING_CAPACITY_ALIGNMENT

Centered on framing the public discourse about social and scientific issues, FrameWorks Institute talks about cultural change in the realm of changing cultural mindsets, which they define as “a way of organizing experience.”³⁵ Cultural mindsets are deep patterns of thinking that shape how we understand the world and how we make decisions, and the mindsets that we hold can either justify or questions aspects of the existing social order. They tend to be durable, and they emerge from and are tied to cultural and social practices and institutions. However, in moments of social upheaval or unrest, mindsets can become destabilized and lead to fairly rapid changes in thinking. Changing cultural mindsets could be seen as a strategy, with narrative change as a means to make progress toward cultural change.

The Pop Culture Collaborative focuses on deep and long-term cultural change as a means to social change. They seek to transform narrative oceans through narrative immersion. This approach stems from a belief that widespread cultural change can be achieved when millions of people are immersed over time in narrative oceans constructed by coordinated story experiences and organized communities that “express diverse and complex perspectives while also holding the same core ideas.”³⁶

Harnessing the power of mass media

Engaging the media can be a way to broaden reach to audiences or to target specific types of audiences, depending on the media outlet. By working with the media, including journalists and political commentators, you can educate different groups about a complicated or contentious issue, gain public support for your cause, and attract interest from potential funders or partners. On the other hand, time and thoughtfulness are required to do media engagement work in an effective way. The [National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement](#) provides some useful tips and factors to consider related to media engagement. Organizations such as the [Solutions Journalism Network](#) provide information and resources for mission-driven organizations, and [Media Matters for America](#) monitors, analyzes, and corrects politically conservative misinformation in American mass media.

The Opportunity Agenda has developed a series of case studies on narrative change, and most, if not all, involved a mass media component.³⁷ In some cases, activists and advocates developed communications strategies to harness the power and reach of mass media. The ACLU, for example, engaged in a campaign to end racial profiling that incorporated both legal and media engagement strategies.³⁸ To get their message out, they held a press conference in June 1999 to launch their campaign and release a report called “Driving While Black: Racial Profiling on Our Nation’s Highways.” The announcement and report generated widespread media coverage, and the Opportunity Agenda found that articles referring specifically to “driving while Black” increased from just 72 articles in 1998 to more than 300 in 1999.

In a case study on the “Blackfish” Effect, the Opportunity Agenda shows how documentary films can be a surprisingly effective medium through which to educate audiences, raise awareness, and lead to social change.³⁹ With a modest budget, the documentary film *Blackfish*, about an orca whale at SeaWorld who killed its trainer, changed the story about the plight of oceanic mammals kept in captivity. It was an example of a dramatic real-life story, told in the form of a documentary film, that appealed to the audience’s emotions and changed hearts and minds in a relatively short period of time.

35 FrameWorks Institute. (2020). *Mindset shifts: What are they? Why do they matter? How do they happen? (A FrameWorks Strategic Report)*. <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/FRAJ8064-Mindset-Shifts-200612-WEB.pdf>

36 Evans, B. A. (2022). *From Stories to Systems: Using a Narrative Systems Approach to Inform Narrative Change Strategies*. Pop Culture Collaborative.

37 The Opportunity Agenda. (2021). *Shifting the Narrative*. https://opportunityagenda.org/messaging_reports/shifting-the-narrative/

38 The Opportunity Agenda. (2021). *Narrative Shift and the Campaign to End Racial Profiling*. https://opportunityagenda.org/messaging_reports/shifting-the-narrative/case-6

39 The Opportunity Agenda. (2021). *Documentary Film and the “Blackfish” Effect*. https://opportunityagenda.org/messaging_reports/shifting-the-narrative/case-3

Building narrative power in communities

There is a growing recognition among narrative change leaders that narrative, or the ability to shape meaning, is not power in and of itself. However, narrative can be used as a tool, and narrative change can help build durable power. As a recent report from Million Voters Project and Power California notes, power building has tended to be absent from the philanthropic sector's assessment of the narrative ecosystem, but "narratives that advance freedom, justice, and inclusion rise from the ground up and from those whose lived experiences with oppression demand a new reality . . . power building and organizing groups are uniquely positioned to draw deeply from the expertise and innovations of their constituents, mobilize people around common ideas, and create strong alignment across organizations and movements. These are all essential ingredients for making our narratives widespread, durable, and powerful."⁴⁰

Some funders and practitioners interested in narrative change are focusing on community-based and grassroots organizations as a way to prioritize community power-building work. They see narrative as integral to power building, and there is a focus on "building the capacity of organizations to build their own narrative power."⁴¹ In some cases, this takes the form of direct grants to community organizations to support their narrative change work, whereas in others narrative change consultants and strategists are engaged to work with community organizations to provide technical assistance and training to build organizational capacity for this work.

Supporting movements

Related to community power-building work is the use of narratives and narrative shifts to support and strengthen movements geared toward large-scale social change through base building, grassroots organizing, and collective action. For instance, narratives around the importance of the "essential worker" during the COVID-19 pandemic have been used to help recruit low-wage workers as organizers, educate and build support among the public for low-wage workers, and attract partners and allies to the cause. Much work needs to be done at the organizational and collective level to build on the narrative infrastructure that currently exists among the organizations that work to advance workers' rights.

The Opportunity Agenda highlights the important role of the gun safety movement in their case study on Gun Politics and Narrative Shift.⁴² After the 2012 mass killing of 20 children at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut, a mother of five with a background in public relations created a group called Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America and launched a grassroots movement. Moms Demand Action joined forces with other groups, including Giffords, Brady, the National Coalition to Stop Gun Violence, and Mayors Against Illegal Guns. Later, some of these groups were subsumed under an organization called Everytown for Gun Safety, funded in large part by Michael Bloomberg. Their narrative change efforts focused on showing that the NRA was no longer the most powerful lobby in America and that voters want action on this issue, and they promoted "common sense" gun laws as a win-win that would not only save lives but also help politicians win elections.

40 Million Voters Project and Power California. (2024). *Narrative Power: Accelerating Narrative Change from the Ground Up*.

41 Moore, M. and Sen, R. (2022). *Funding Narrative Change: An assessment and framework by the Convergence Partnership*. <https://convergencepartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Funding-Narrative-Change.pdf>

42 The Opportunity Agenda. (2021). *Gun Politics and Narrative Shift*. https://opportunityagenda.org/messaging_reports/shifting-the-narrative/case-5

Because narrative change requires broad-based shifts in storytelling, mass culture and mass media receive the most attention, and yet the Convergence Partnership maintains that mass movements should be added as a critical and effective vehicle for narrative change in line with mass culture and mass media. They write that “[f]leshing out how narrative change can be (and has been) achieved through mass movements is part of the work in front of us,” and they go on to add that regional foundations and grassroots organizations will have a major role to play due to their “proximity to community-based movement work.”⁴³

Focusing on policy change

Policy change is often a larger goal of narrative change efforts, and most of the Opportunity Agenda case studies featured policy change in some way, whether it was to introduce more gun safety measures or repeal welfare benefits. A key part of the campaign to end racial profiling, which was described in an Opportunity Agenda case study, focused on a policy change. In 2001, Sen. Russ Feingold (D-WI) and Rep. John Conyers (D-MI) introduced the End Racial Profiling Act, which had been developed with input from civil rights advocates and law enforcement practitioners and had bipartisan support. Ultimately, the events of 9/11 and the subsequent focus on protecting national security and curbing illegal immigration weakened the country’s will and resolve to end racial and ethnic profiling. While a policy change did not occur, this case is notable in that the 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman and the police killing of George Floyd in 2020 thrust the issue of racial profiling back into the national spotlight. The deaths of Martin, Floyd, and countless other victims of racial profiling sparked the Black Lives Matter movement. While policy did not change in this case, the culture has changed to the extent that systemic racism has become a common phrase in the mass culture beyond just activist and academic circles.

Synthesis of approaches

As noted, the Opportunity Agenda has compiled case studies of narrative change.⁴⁴ In Table 3, we attempt to synthesize the types of change and relevant vehicles for each of the cases they describe.

43 Moore, M., & Sen, R. (2022). *Funding Narrative Change: An assessment and framework by the Convergence Partnership*. <https://convergencepartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Funding-Narrative-Change.pdf>

44 The Opportunity Agenda. (2021). *Shifting the Narrative: Lessons Learned*. https://opportunityagenda.org/messaging_reports/shifting-the-narrative/lessons-learned/

Type of change and vehicles for narrative change by narrative change effort

Note that while social media is not a vehicle of narrative change explicitly called out by the Convergence Partnership, it may be an effective tool across narrative change efforts, for different types of change, and across vehicles for narrative change. It was included in this table because its use has been especially notable in the Black Lives Matter Movement and the #MeToo Movement.

Table 3 | Type of Change and Vehicles for Narrative Change

Narrative Change Effort	Narrative Change	Cultural Change	Policy Change	Other Type of Change	Mass Culture	Mass Media	Mass Movement	Social Media
Campaign to end racial profiling	●	●	Policy has not yet passed		●	●	●	●
Gun Politics	●		Mixed results			●	●	
The "Blackfish" Effect	●	●		Corporate (SeaWorld halted its Orca program)		●		
#MeToo Movement	●	●	More at the institutional level		●	●	●	●
Death penalty	●		More at the state level		●	●		
War on Poverty to "ending welfare as we know it"	●	●	●			●		

The question of audience

Narrative change is often linked to audience research, and one form of audience research incorporates audience profiles and segmentation. In recent years, there has been greater interest in understanding the views of audiences and tailoring narrative content accordingly. In some cases, this means identifying and strategically reaching targeted audiences that may be more open and receptive to narrative change or the issues on which a particular organization is working, or who needs to be engaged in order to achieve particular goals.

While some narrative change practitioners target their efforts on specific audiences, FrameWorks Institute points out that narrative change is about shifting culture broadly, which means shifting the broader narratives in the society as a whole.⁴⁵ They point out that while short-term political communications may adopt a segmented approach to mobilize or persuade a specific group to achieve a particular goal, narrative change requires a longer term perspective and must focus on the broader public. It could make sense for campaigns or initiatives to target specific audiences to see who might be persuadable or who might become disseminators of a new narrative. However, they point out that those engaged in narrative change should look for narratives that have the potential to spread widely across audiences, and “since new narratives can only make their way into discourse through heavy repetition,” they must be “usable by different messengers, with different groups, and across different channels.” The narratives must be tailored and adapted as they are used with different audiences, but FrameWorks Institute argues that only by disseminating narratives broadly will they begin to change our discourse and the broader culture.

Ecosystems for narrative change

In order to achieve the conditions under which narratives can effectively act as a lever for broader social change, many thought leaders in the narrative change space posit the need for a strong ecosystem to ensure the effective deployment and amplification of narratives. According to Rashad Robinson: “Building narrative power . . . requires a healthy ecosystem combining leadership development, relevant infrastructure, sustained financial resources, and organizations working across sectors.”⁴⁶ He also provides some considerations for who defines and builds narrative ecosystems: “We firmly believe this ecosystem must be led from the ground up, so that narratives can gain widespread traction and so the process of narrative development can model the power shifts we need in our society at large.” This implies investment in training and leadership development among what ReFrame calls “meaning makers” from “communities whose stories have traditionally been silenced, misrepresented, or ignored.”⁴⁷

Race Forward notes that developing a narrative ecosystem allows for connections to be made between “an abundance of skills, capacities, and ideas” relevant to narrative change, and ensure “the easeful sharing of visions, strategies, and resources” that supports narrative work.⁴⁸ They define a narrative ecosystem as “a network of connected individuals and organizations that can share knowledge, expertise, skills, ideas, capacities and work, to advance a narrative system across a diversity of fronts along different timelines.” In keeping with the range of approaches relevant to narrative change, they propose an ecosystem of relevant narrative change actors (potential “partners, collaborators, and/or allies”) that includes researchers, strategic communications experts, movement and cultural organizers, artists and performers, journalists, and narrative strategists.

45 FrameWorks Institute. (2021). *Talking about Poverty: Narratives, Counter-Narratives, and Telling Effective Stories*. <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Talking-about-poverty.pdf>

46 Robinson, R. (2018). *Changing Our Narrative about Narrative*. Othering & Belonging Institute. <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/changing-our-narrative-about-narrative>

47 Soriano, J., Phelan, J., Freeman Brown, K., Cortés, H., & Choi, J. (2019). *Creating an Ecosystem for Narrative Power*. *ReFrame*. <https://www.thisisreframe.org/blog-posts/creating-an-ecosystem-for-narrative-power>

48 Race Forward. (2022). *An Introduction to the Narrative System and the Narrative Ecosystem*. <https://www.raceforward.org/sites/default/files/Narrative-System-Ecosystem.pdf>

In a similar vein, Global Narrative Hive defines successful ecosystems as ones where key actors have strong relationships, are able to align efforts when needed, have resources for the long run, and are able to share and mutually benefit from their collective learning.⁴⁹ They highlight three groups of actors central to ecosystems for narrative power:

- **Narrative actors:** individuals and groups involved in bringing knowledge, relationships, and capabilities that can be used by movements to learn about, generate, and disseminate narratives (these include researchers, strategists, power builders, trainers, network builders, artists, storytellers, journalists, and media platforms).
- **Movement actors:** individuals, initiatives, organizations, and networks that are seeking change through collective action (these include formal organizations and social movement entities).
- **Funders:** actors working to provide resources to different parts of the ecosystem.

Given their critical role, some commentators have highlighted how funders can best support narrative ecosystems. Some commentators note that funders “need to act thoughtfully in how we help create an ecosystem for narrative power, centering an accompaniment approach that aligns principles and process, starts from the real-world reality and goals of our partners, and invests in the infrastructure movements need to build and sustain narrative power.”⁵⁰ Moreover, rather than investing in specific issue areas and movements, funders should align with the larger goal of shifting deep narratives or broader cross-movement narratives.⁵¹

49 Global Narrative Hive. (2023). *Conditions to Flourish: Understanding the Ecosystem for Narrative Power*. https://www.fundersinitiativeforcivilsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Eng_GNH_Report_-2_O2.pdf

50 Savage, J. (2021). Putting words into action: personal reflections on supporting narrative change. *Open Global Rights*. <https://www.openglobalrights.org/putting-words-into-action-personal-reflections-on-supporting-narrative-change/>

51 Global Narrative Hive. (2023). *Conditions to Flourish: Understanding the Ecosystem for Narrative Power*. https://www.fundersinitiativeforcivilsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Eng_GNH_Report_-2_O2.pdf

Building narrative infrastructure

Infrastructure is also an important element of narrative change work, given the need for collaboration and connection across the ecosystem—this serves as the “connective tissue” that links organizations and enables them to build and scale their work.⁵² The Pop Culture Collaborative highlights six key strategies for those seeking to invest in narrative infrastructure:⁵³

Stage 1 Laying the Ground

- **Leadership:** Cultivate visionary leadership, pathbreaking organizations, and fieldwide partnerships
- **Intelligence:** Support narrative landscape analysis and power mapping, industry and audience research, and ongoing learning and evaluation

Stage 2 Network Organizing

- **Collaboration:** Fund organizational hubs and cultural strategy teams that braid together creative communities and cross-sector field members via convenings, partnership development, and network weaving
- **Power:** Resource artist- and field-led pipelines and industry organizing that create new entry points and bypass and/or eliminate systemic barriers inside narrative industries

Stage 3 Narrative Immersion

- **Innovation:** Invest in organizations, companies, and platforms that decide the means of production and distribution
- **Community:** Build networks and initiatives that create and fortify pluralist communities (i.e. fandoms)

More recent work connecting narrative to power building has also focused on the infrastructure needed to accelerate narrative change at scale. Million Voters Project and Power California highlight four essential areas of narrative power building infrastructure that require large-scale and sustained investment: human infrastructure (“a robust ecosystem of grassroots leaders, strategists, communicators, organizers, creators, and community influencers, grounded in communities most impacted, who are primed to share and cultivate our narratives in multiple spaces”); relational infrastructure (“structures that allow individuals and organizations to build greater trust and move in strategic narrative alignment together across issues and campaigns”); hard tools (“a comprehensive suite of tools for designing, distributing, and evaluating narrative strategies and content, as well as the knowledge and capacity to use them”); and financial infrastructure (“the sustained funding needed to support narrative work at scale”).⁵⁴

⁵² Barsoum, G. (2023). A New Framework for Understanding Power Building. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.

⁵³ Van Slyke, T. (2022). *Narrative Infrastructure for Narrative Immersion*. New York, NY: Pop Culture Collaborative.

⁵⁴ Million Voters Project and Power California. (2024). *Narrative Power: Accelerating Narrative Change from the Ground Up*.

Strengthening organizational capacity

Organizational capacity is another critical piece of this picture. To be effective in narrative change work, organizations require increased capacity in different areas. In a study on narrative change for health and racial equity in California, interviewees identified critical needs, including increased capacity for communications knowledge and skills, support for understanding and telling stories, research and planning, rapid response capabilities, and culture change work.⁵⁵ Interview respondents stated that some of these capacities are needed across multiple organizations whereas others were needed only by a few organizations focused on network and coalition building that could then serve as “hubs” and share those communications and narrative change resources, including shared technology access, communications expertise, and the infrastructure to amplify narratives. On the topic of national communications firms, there was a belief by interviewees that they are not cost-effective and often do not share the values of local, more grassroots organizations. The participants asked instead to work with smaller, more values-aligned firms that complement existing skills and strengths that are available in communities.

The importance of iteration and learning

According to The Opportunity Agenda, narrative change, especially around contested social justice issues, requires investment and a disciplined approach that involves collaboration, strategic communications, public engagement, and responsiveness to cultural and societal trends.⁵⁶ They view narrative change as a cyclical process that includes (1) strategy discussions within fields and movements to understand shared goals and areas of disagreement among both proponents and impacted communities; (2) communications research on audience views and the media landscape along with opportunities for audience and media engagement; and (3) applying and field testing new narratives and shorter-term messaging aimed at changing hearts, minds, and policy. Shifting narratives requires an iterative approach that involves listening for what is happening “on the ground,” learning from what is working and what is not, and recalibrating and refining strategies and tactics as well as narratives and shorter-term messaging in the face of changing external circumstances.

How long does narrative change take?

While there is no definitive empirical research on the approximate length of time for each stage of narrative change, the Convergence Partnership’s report on Funding Narrative Change explores the issue of how long narrative change takes. The authors asked funders how long it took to shift a narrative, and “most said between ten and twenty years. A few described it as a ‘generational’ effort. None said less than a decade.”⁵⁷ Some of the funders interviewed for the study were involved in shifting the narrative around health and health equity to focus on the “social determinants of health.” They described shifting the narrative over a 10-year period. The battle for marriage equality started in May 1970 when a same-sex couple was denied a marriage license in Minnesota. In June 2015, the Supreme Court ruled that denying same-sex couples to marry violates the U.S. Constitution, which means that 45 years passed between those two points in time.⁵⁸

55 Lynn, J., & Kathlene, L. (2020). *Narrative change for health & racial equity: Exploring capacity & alignment*. PolicySolve, LLC. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346811466_NARRATIVE_CHANGE_FOR_HEALTH_RACIAL_EQUITY_EXPLORING_CAPACITY_ALIGNMENT

56 Jenkins, A. (2018). *Shifting the Narrative: What It Takes to Reframe the Debate for Social Justice in the US*. Othering & Belonging Institute. <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/shifting-narrative>

57 Moore, M., & Sen, R. (2022). *Funding Narrative Change: An assessment and framework by the Convergence Partnership*. <https://convergencepartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Funding-Narrative-Change.pdf>

58 Proteus Fund. (2015). *Hearts & Minds: The Untold Story of How Philanthropy and the Civil Marriage Collaborative Helped America Embrace Marriage Equality*. <https://www.haasjr.org/sites/default/files/resources/CMC%20Case%20Study.pdf>

As for some shorter narrative time frames, the Lear Center found that it can take three or more years to see the narrative effects of a new television show.⁵⁹ The Opportunity Agenda shares an example of a successful narrative shift that occurred in a relatively short time frame. It took three years from the release of the documentary film *Blackfish* to change the narrative about the morality of keeping large sea mammals in captivity for the sake of human entertainment.⁶⁰ The film was released in 2013, and SeaWorld Entertainment, under mounting pressure from its sponsors and the general public, announced in 2016 that they would begin to phase out its orca shows and halt its orca breeding program.

Narratives are not short-term messages focused on a single audience but rather larger stories that often transcend any one campaign for policy change. Thus, based on what we know, it appears that shifting the narrative can take between a few years to an entire generation, depending on the breadth and complexity of the social change issue. Despite the extended time frame, practitioners say funders are not matching this timeline with long-term funding. Narrative work requires a long-game strategy with an extended funding investment at a large scale.


59 USC Norman Lear Center. (2023). *Narrative Change and Impact: Analysis of In-Depth Interviews with Experts, Practitioners, and Funders in the Narrative Change Field*. USC Annenberg. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1omClc2hB5nQ2BhAmbLEzUasMczBA9b9G/view>

60 The Opportunity Agenda. (2021). *Documentary Film and the "Blackfish" Effect*. https://opportunityagenda.org/messaging_reports/shifting-the-narrative/case-3

WHAT TYPES OF CHANGE ARE RELEVANT TO NARRATIVE STRATEGIES?

In this section we consider outcomes relevant to narrative change strategies and situate these within considerations of how and at what levels change occurs.

First, we revisit the idea of the Micro, Meso, and Macro levels proposed by the Narrative Policy Framework and infuse the Story of Self, Us, and Now proposed by Marshall Ganz. We also incorporate ORS Impact’s approach of broadening outcomes beyond impact to also include influence, leverage, and learning.



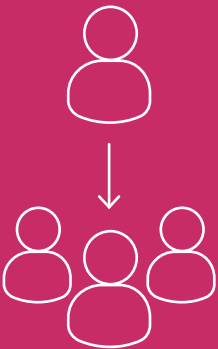
Individual (Micro)
“Story of Self”

Some narratives are more prescriptive than others and may involve **a call to personal action**.

For marginalized groups who face structural constraints and do not have the means to realize narrative prescriptions, the incompatibility of some narratives with their daily experiences raises questions about the ability of narratives to influence behavior and decision making.

Types of Change

- Attitudes
- Beliefs or perceptions
- Behavior
- Knowledge
- Identity
- Mindsets
- Skills
- Goals or outlook about the future



Layer in Between (Meso)
People and groups who mediate between the micro and macro to bridge the story of self and we

This group may include the following:

- Mass media agents/actors, such as journalists and political analysts
- Mass culture agents/producers, such as artists and musicians (“cultural creators as agents of social change”)
- Mass movement actors, such as policy advocates and community organizers
- Narrative change “experts,” including consultants and strategists
- Funders often provide the resources to do this “mediating” work

Mass movement actors bridge the story of self, us, and now. Within the context of social movements, the story of now is **a call to collective action**.

Types of Change

Influence

- Capacity
- Practices
- Partnerships
- Public or political will (related to changing hearts and minds)

Leverage

- Funding
- Staffing
- Other resources



Societal (Macro)
Culture,
Institutions, Systems
“Story of Us”

There is a continuum of macro-level change that can occur. For instance, there could be a small shift in a belief system or worldview up to an entire paradigm shift or change in a dominant worldview.

There is the possibility of different scenarios:

- You could have a change in culture or belief systems without a policy change.
- You could have a policy change without a change in culture or belief systems.
- You could have a change in the culture or belief systems *and* a policy change.

Types of Change

- Culture (customs, norms, values)
- Belief systems or worldviews
- Policy
- Legal
- Conditions (socio-political, economic, etc.)

The literature also highlights several ongoing challenges related to outcome and measurement, which may be the focus of future efforts and investment:

- It can be difficult to identify clear outcomes or goals for narrative change efforts, and it is important for social change makers to note that narrative change is “not an end in itself, but a means to an end.”⁶¹ Is the end goal to change the culture and/or policy, and are there intermediate outcomes along the way, such as a change in attitudes or mindsets or a change in behavior or practices? Without knowing what success looks like, it is difficult to develop strategies and identify activities to reach a goal.
- A related question is: Who gets to define what success looks like? Is it right to impose a definition of success on others and then strategically use narratives to alter other people’s attitudes and behaviors? This is a moral and ethical question that some narrative change practitioners may grapple with. On a related note, when a definition of success is imposed on others in a way that does not resonate at a personal and collective level, then efforts to shift the narrative may not be successful.



For further reflections and guidance on measuring narrative change and understanding the impact of narrative change strategies, see ORS Impact. (2021). *Measuring Narrative Change: Understanding Progress and Navigating Complexity*.

61 Davidson, B. (2016). Narrative Change and the Open Society Public Health Program. https://askjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/20160711_Narrative-change-paper-1.pdf

- It can still feel challenging to measure the effectiveness of narrative change as a means for achieving social change, stemming in part from the confusion of what is meant by narrative change and the challenge of identifying clear outcomes and goals. In addition, narrative change happens over a long period of time, and it can involve change at many levels. As a result, efforts to shift narratives can be difficult to evaluate. However, interest in learning is high, with many saying they would like to have more access to tools, resources, and ways of measuring progress.⁶²
- A priority for future measurement is developing outcomes, metrics, and evaluation work in the mass movements space. According to the Convergence Partnership, mass movements have “only the most nascent set of [narrative] metrics,” especially compared to mass culture and mass media, and figuring out how narrative change can be and has been achieved through mass movements is part of the work moving forward.⁶³ While there is a commitment to investing in community narrative power building to equip people and communities with the tools to make change, the work is complex. For instance, there is growing awareness that narrative can be a tool to shape meaning and build power, but it is unclear how to strategically integrate narrative change work with base-building and on-the-ground organizing. This is one area in which working with and learning from local partners and grassroots intermediaries that have close ties to community-based movement work will be critical.

62 Lynn, J., & Kathlene, L. (2020). *Narrative change for health & racial equity: Exploring capacity & alignment*. PolicySolve, LLC. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346811466_NARRATIVE_CHANGE_FOR_HEALTH_RACIAL_EQUITY_EXPLORING_CAPACITY_ALIGNMENT

63 Moore, M., & Sen, R. (2022). *Funding Narrative Change: An assessment and framework by the Convergence Partnership*. <https://convergencepartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Funding-Narrative-Change.pdf>

IMPLICATIONS AND REFLECTIONS

Narrative change is an increasingly popular approach among change makers, but it is not an approach that applies easily to every social issue. While narrative can be a powerful tool to shape meaning and shift power to advance broad social change, it requires thoughtfulness and intentionality about if, when, and how narrative change is used.

More than ever, as we address complex social problems, having a clear Theory of Change will be important. What are the goals of your initiative, and is there a model that establishes the linkages between strategies, outcomes, and goals to achieve social impact? How does your initiative expect to attain the changes that you seek, and what are the strategies and actions that will get you closer to your goals? What outcomes do you seek, and are there interim outcomes along the way that will help you know if your initiative is making progress toward its goals?

One mistake would be to have funders focus on a particular narrative and pour resources into efforts to flood that narrative into the mass media, mass culture, and mass movements without a clear game plan. Funders may need to be flexible, depending on the particular issue and the external circumstances. Does the issue involve a social movement and a collective or personal call to action? Depending on the issue, does it make sense to use real-life stories of “lived experience” or a composite of counter-stories of people whose voices have been excluded, or is it an issue that lends itself to the use of fictional stories or narratives?

At a larger level, are you trying to change individual behaviors and mindsets? Are you focused on changing policy or the entire culture? Are you trying to do all of these things, and if so, why? Once you reflect on and reach some initial conclusions to these larger questions, then it makes sense to think more strategically and tactically about how and when to engage partners as well as vehicles of narrative change, such as mass media, mass culture, and mass movements.

The use of narratives to shape how people perceive and understand the world around them, motivate action, and achieve social change is a long-game approach, and those engaged in narrative change work will need to persist over the long haul. Building a narrative infrastructure geared toward social change and impact will take a long-term investment in time and resources, and it will require trust, collaboration, and sustained efforts to reach alignment at multiple levels.

As a general approach, shifting narratives will require listening for what is happening “on the ground,” learning from what is working and what is not, and recalibrating and refining strategies and tactics as well as narratives and shorter term messaging in the face of changing external circumstances.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

This report reviews the literature on the use of narratives and narrative change as part of social change. Most of the research for this report occurred in mid-2023, with additional literature reviewed and added through early 2024. The report utilized ChatGPT-4 to assist in identifying relevant bodies of academic literature and in proposing initial summaries as a starting point. The results were checked against outputs in Google Scholar and the actual content in scholarly articles and books. ChatGPT-4 was also used to identify relevant works in the gray literature, including reports, white papers, and other quasi-academic resources. Only publicly available data was entered into ChatGPT-4 for this project. While ChatGPT-4 was correct in identifying the most widely cited academic sources, including scholarly journal articles and books, it was less successful in identifying gray literature sources, often resulting in “hallucinations” of resources that do not exist. The use of generative AI for this report facilitated an expansion of scope for the literature review and sped up the process of generating a big picture “roadmap” of the relevant bodies of literature and key content sources. However, the use of generative AI also required additional time for fact-checking and verification of outputs. While generative AI provided useful assistance on this research project, one realization through the process was the need for a human to carefully guide and oversee the work and verify any outputs that are generated.

WE THANK THE BILL & MELINDA GATES FOUNDATION

for the generous support and thought partnership that made this literature review possible.

