

FUNDING

NARRATIVE

CHANGE



An Assessment and Framework by the Convergence Partnership



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PREFACE

“That’s not how we do it.”

A statement like this one lies at the genesis of this report. If you work in the narrative change arena, it is a statement you have probably heard from fellow funders and practitioners. As an emerging field, there is a diversity of opinion about what narrative is and how to shift it. Funders of narrative change work are themselves shaping and shaped by the varied approaches.

The Convergence Partnership was interested in better understanding the ways in which “we” do “it.” Who are the “we?” Funders and practitioners that work in the narrative change arena. What is the “it?” Approaches to funding and bringing about narrative change.

As a new strategic area of its work, the Convergence Partnership was interested in better understanding the ways in which “we” do “it.” Who are the “we?” Funders and practitioners that work in the narrative change arena. What is the “it?” Approaches to funding and bringing about narrative change. Established in 2007, Convergence Partnership (the Partnership) is a national funder collaborative working to transform policies, practices, and systems to advance racial justice and health equity. Given the nation’s fraught racial discourse, the Partnership believed narrative change and storytelling was a central strategy for shifting public attitudes toward racial justice and health

equity. Today, the Partnership is led by eleven national, statewide, and local foundations and multifunder initiatives. In 2018, we hired Narrative Arts (then Working Narratives) and Moore + Associates to help us develop and implement a strategy to advance racial justice and health equity narratives with funders, grantees, and the Partnership itself. In the years since, they have conducted a series of trainings, audits, and workshops to help establish a shared understanding and approach to narrative change among these stakeholders.

As we continued to dive into the work and engaged in the narrative change space, we, like many of you, felt like we had entered into a vortex. Moments where new narratives were catalyzed, like the racial justice uprising in 2020, have been followed by backlash and retrenchment. The stories of trans people have never been more prevalent, helping to spark a generational shift in identification. At the same time, an alternative narrative has been

revived, attributing these changes to a nefarious trans agenda. The Supreme Court decision to overturn Roe and Casey has raised the stakes between two competing narratives about abortion and those who seek it and provide it.

It was therefore not surprising that so many supporting and working in the narrative change field were eager to better understand how we can do this work better. At the same time, several of the Partnership's philanthropic partners have been exposed to different approaches to narrative change work in other spaces. It became clear that this work was being approached in different ways by different funders and practitioners.

Because narrative change is an emerging field, its utilization to advance racial justice and health equity is also new, particularly in philanthropy. This means that much of the analysis of key narrative trends around racial justice and health equity, and the broader approaches to shifting narrative, are also emerging. Because this work is often siloed, the lessons and insights identified through one project are rarely shared with other efforts, and vice versa. Making this report publicly available will contribute to our knowledge of one another's work.

To explore these challenges, the Partnership commissioned this assessment and report, with principal research and writing by Mik Moore and Rinku Sen. Both are leaders in the field, with a particular expertise in the role of narrative in shaping our collective understanding of race.

This report shares the findings of a field scan of the narrative change work going on in racial justice and health equity philanthropy, with a focus on leading foundations, funder tables, and narrative change practitioners. Its goal is to help increase the sector's shared understanding of the state of the field, including best practices for narrative change work in philanthropy.

We hope it sparks a robust conversation among our friends and colleagues!

In unity,



Amanda Navarro

Executive Director, Convergence Partnership

AUTHORS' NOTE

This is not our first rodeo.

Between us we have decades of experience identifying and shifting narratives in order to make the world less fearful and more hopeful. Over the years we have worked closely with funders and fellow practitioners to strengthen the field with smart investments and strategic innovations. Yet despite all of this experience, we learned a lot through these interviews and our literature review. We are grateful to everyone who took the time to speak with us for this report!

We have analyzed the findings of our research with some specific questions in mind. We wanted to know:

- What are the different approaches to narrative change funding?
- Is one approach dominant?
- Who are the practitioners hired or funded to support these narrative change efforts?
- Do they share a philosophy in how they train, audit, strategize, or otherwise engage in this work?
- How cohesive or disjointed is the field as a whole?

To answer these questions and more, we have organized the report into seven sections. We hope you read them all. If you're short on time, please check out the Executive Summary and the Findings. They are brief. We promise.

A lot is on the line with these and many other narrative fights. In a precarious era, when past victories are too often ephemeral, it is incumbent upon the funders and practitioners of narrative change work to get it right. We hope this report helps move all of us in the right direction to reach our common goals.



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Narrative Initiative is a national intermediary that helps social justice actors build the narrative power pillar of their strategy.



Mik Moore is a writer, producer, and strategist who brings his love for comedy, pop culture, social movements, and media into his narrative change work whenever possible.

Moore + Associates is a creative agency that has developed narrative and culture change strategies with foundations invested in grassroots economic, climate, and racial justice movements.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Welcome! If you've read this far, keep reading! We promise to make it worth your while.

This report covers a lot of ground. It was commissioned by a racial justice and health equity funder collaborative that wanted to know how others investing in **narrative change** were doing it. So, we asked them. And we asked many of the narrative practitioners they work with. Here's a bit of what we learned.

Not sure what we mean by *narrative change*? Jump ahead to our [Definition of Terms on page 6!](#)

Four Findings...

1

As you might expect when surveying a group of social justice funders in 2022, there is an existing commitment to grassroots and community-based solutions. This commitment holds true when the strategy is narrative change. Yet **no single approach dominates community narrative power building**. Disagreements about narrative language and tactics, the role of practitioners, and how best to align around effective counter narratives complicate the picture.

2

Speaking of expert practitioners, they play an increasingly important role due to the emerging nature of the field. An informal network of trainers, strategists, researchers, and storytellers has materialized to meet the needs of communities seeking to create narrative shifts around a particular issue or policy. Seeded and supported in part by philanthropy, these **narrative change practitioners have an outsized role not only in serving the field, but in shaping it.**

3

A close cousin of narrative change is cultural change, a similarly emergent social change strategy that in many ways set the stage for our current moment. **Most funders and practitioners leading today's narrative change work cut their teeth making the case for cultural change** as an approach as worthy of investment as field, advocacy, and communications. One of the dominant narrative engagement frameworks focuses on influencing Hollywood and popular culture, where many powerful cultural shifts occur. We found that this has helped to shape the theory of change among this subset of narrative change funders. They see the value of pop culture strategies but don't want to neglect approaches that are more accessible to the typical change maker.

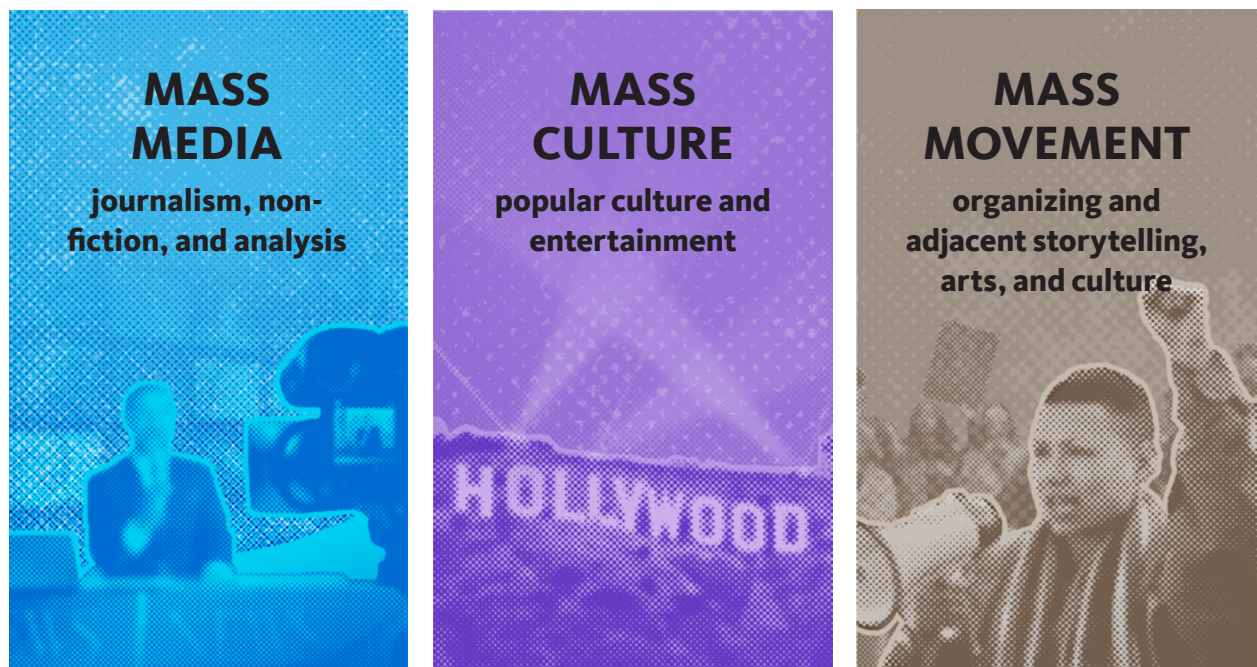
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Once you get past the fact that not everyone agrees on how best to define narrative change, we encountered another challenge: whether and how to align around particular narratives. In our interviews, the Race Class Narrative, co-created by Anat Shenker-Osorio, Ian Haney Lopez, and Heather McGhee, was cited most often and clearly has shaped the thinking of many. Yet **there is a divergence in the field between efforts to coalesce storytelling around particular narratives and efforts to surface narratives from impacted communities.** It isn't clear if there is a desire to reconcile these approaches or pursue them simultaneously.

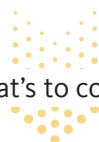
...And One Suggested Framework

At the end of this report, we provide a framework that organizes investments in narrative change. Because narrative change requires broad-based shifts in storytelling, mass culture and mass media receive the most attention. Mass culture reaches billions with powerful, entertaining storytelling in film, television, video games, music, and beyond. Mass media, in particular news and non-fiction media, reaches into every household with a claim to sharing true stories of history, current events and day-to-day life. **This report recommends naming mass movements, alongside mass culture and mass media, as a critical and effective vehicle for narrative change that reaches a wide audience through collective action and storytelling.**

FRAMEWORK FOR FUNDING NARRATIVE CHANGE



OK, that's your preview of what's to come! Read on for the good stuff.



DEFINITION OF TERMS

NARRATIVE

The themes and ideas that permeate collections of stories

DEEP NARRATIVE

The stickiest themes and ideas that have permeated stories for more than 50 years

NARRATIVE STRATEGY

A long term effort to raise certain values and diminish others in ways that engage diverse types of narrators and audiences, and that are not bound by short term communications needs

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

Tactics for creating frames, messages and stories to influence a short or medium term policy or practice outcome (e.g., support pending legislation or policy approaches)

NARRATIVE POWER

The ability to shape public discourse, debate and imagery

COMMUNITY NARRATIVE POWER BUILDING

Growing narrative power in the hands of local communities that experience the outcomes of harmful and helpful narratives

FRAME

A guide that directs people where to look and helps them interpret what they see

STORY

A depiction of events driven by or happening to a set of characters; may be true or fictional

DISINFORMATION

Lies and propaganda in the form of news and information

CULTURAL STRATEGY

An alignment of tactics to create new norms, language, practices, or relationships

CULTURAL CHANGE

An effort to wield influence in the spaces and institutions that set social norms, characterizations of various communities, and relationships between communities and institutions

These definitions are composites of those currently in use by the sector.

FINDINGS

So, after dozens of interviews, surveys of leading practitioners, and a review of the key literature, what did we learn? A lot.

To keep this manageable, we have focused on eight, critical takeaways which we sorted into two tiers.

OVERARCHING FINDINGS

Expert practitioners are influential

Community narrative power-building is important... but complicated

Creating narrative alignment: top down vs bottom up

Culture is one key gateway to narrative

SPECIFIC FINDINGS

Funders are eager to learn

Narrative change is a long-term proposition

Desire for greater alignment within and across foundations

Audience is emerging as greater focus

Our **overarching findings** require the most explanation and analysis, often showcasing divergences in approach if not outcome. We address these findings in a collective manner with a new framework we lay out in our [Recommendations on page 23](#).

We then present **specific findings** that are more straightforward, generally representing a consensus viewpoint about a single issue. These are also addressed in section five via a set of recommendations designed to remove obstacles to effective funding of narrative strategy to advance health equity and racial justice.

Overarching Findings

EXPERT PRACTITIONERS ARE INFLUENTIAL

Narrative change, as a discrete funding strategy, is a relatively recent addition to the funding priorities of foundations in the United States. Among the funders we interviewed, several dated their involvement to the late 2000s. Most joined only in the past five to eight years, often inspired by the rapid shift in public opinion about gay marriage, out of concern over the popular embrace of racist narratives amplified by Trump, or to extend accountability to others during the Trump administration.

In part because it is such a young field, experts in narrative have been crucial to helping foundations better understand the power of narrative and the opportunities for philanthropy to play a productive role in bringing about narrative change. These experts tend to fall into one of three categories of narrative practitioner:

1. organizational, who are directly embedded within nonprofits and foundations;
2. individual, who work as consultants and creators; and
3. intermediary, who are in companies or nonprofits that provide technical assistance and training.

Their areas of expertise are varied, but often they are seeking to address challenges including:

- What is narrative change?
- How do you change narratives?
- Which narratives are impacting the work of social movements?
- What are the best levers that organizers have to shift narratives?
- How can philanthropy support narrative change effectively?

Experts engage in research and analysis, and they perform training and evaluation. They create content and develop strategy. Experts help funders better understand audiences and assess impact.

So while different foundations and funder tables often have different narrative change strategies, almost all are investing in experts. As one foundation officer said to us, “our strategy is investing in the people who provide tools, support, and training. We are also investing in organizations that are onto something, then keep investing in their ability to experiment, have impact with their narrative work, which brings benefits beyond the

organizations themselves.” Because much of this funding follows expertise, and much of the expertise is clustered, organizations that are less facile or new to the work may have to work with outside experts before they receive narrative funding directly.

Organizations that engage in organizing and advocacy increasingly have in-house experts on narrative. According to one funder of narrative change work, “people in organizations like Color of Change, NDWA [National Domestic Workers Alliance], and The League have in-house cultural strategists who are also playing the role of impact producers.” Some movement leaders also hold this role. Artists are starting to pair their values with narrative strategies. A recent report smartly coined the term “impact storytellers” to describe those engaged in “intentional, strategic storytelling designed to advance social impact goals.”

We recognized a tension among some funders, who both see the value in narrative experts and are wary of their own tendency to rely on a particular kind of expertise.

Some of the field leaders around narrative change have managed to convince foundations already supporting their other work to consider the value of this work. “Narrative has been a strategy where we have looked to our grantee partners to see if it’s something they are pursuing,” we were told by one funder. “Within the portfolio, Color of Change and NDWA were early adopters of narrative change. But that isn’t the reason we were funding them.”

We recognized a tension among some funders, who both see the value in narrative experts and are wary of their own tendency to rely on a particular kind of expertise. One told us that, “a lot of our organizing aims to challenge assumptions implicit in how philanthropy has constructed itself. We are trying to redefine expertise. It’s thought of as a byproduct of higher education. We think of it as lived experience that intersects root cause, power, and place.” Yet this binary doesn’t recognize an important third category, described to us by one practitioner as the people who have developed professional expertise in framing, storytelling, impact production and distribution by doing the work rather than by studying it. These leaders and movement workers occupy the space between scholars of narrative change and communities most affected by health inequity and racial injustice.

Is there interest among grassroots organizations in working with narrative change practitioners? It depends on who you ask. One funder told us, “we have a capacity building pot of money to work with consultants, but only if grantees ask for help with narrative. We haven’t gotten a request for narrative support.” Yet other funders seem to have no problem finding grantees excited to work with outside consultants.

Supply sometimes exceeds demand for narrative resources, and two capacity issues can limit the uptake and effectiveness of these resources. First, some intermediaries report that their services are too expensive for grassroots groups. As one of the leading researchers in the field told us, “we want to work with grassroots organizations but they can’t afford us.”

Second, even if organizations could afford the technical assistance, or if it’s free to them, it’s difficult to utilize unless narrative strategy is truly assimilated into the organization. Social justice organizations frequently lack enough narrative grounding or strategic alignment to make robust use of technical assistance, which in turn prevents them from requesting or taking advantage of available resources. These missing pieces might include a long-term narrative strategy, a clear audience framework, or even clear campaign goals.

One of the perceived advantages of working with practitioners is the consistency they bring to the work. This can be true, and many of the practitioners we spoke to shared a core set of principles. Yet in a report featuring the largest survey of grassroots grantees doing narrative change work in California it became clear that the field is far from uniform.

“Interviewees reported many barriers to aligning. One of the most significant appears to originate in two very different understandings of what it means to deploy narrative change across multiple organizations: 1. Narrative change requires organizations to share messages and branding, versus; 2. Narrative change is not about using the same words, but about moving a set of ideas, core beliefs, and core stories that express the narrative. Notably, some narrative change consultants interviewed as part of the study advocated for the first approach and others advocated the second, helping to clarify at least part of how this confusion has arisen.”

In our own survey of narrative change intermediaries that work with funders, 80 percent work with both grantees and the foundation staff and/or board. It is therefore likely that some of the difference in approach across funders is influenced by differences among the experts. This creates a strong incentive to codify best practices, clarify theories of change, and resolve conflicts among practitioners. As the example from the report demonstrates, incorporating narrative change into strategic communications goals would be a good place to start.

You may be thinking, "This is like the fourth time I've seen the word 'grassroots' in this report. What exactly do they mean by 'grassroots'?"

When we say "grassroots" we mean people who are drawn together by something that they have in common, something that has personal and community consequences. People who then grant themselves the authority to address this challenge or create the future that they desire.

Our interest here is in grassroots organizations led by and for marginalized communities, usually BIPOC, immigrant, and LGBTQ.

COMMUNITY NARRATIVE POWER-BUILDING IS IMPORTANT

...BUT COMPLICATED

Almost across the board, the foundations and funder tables we interviewed provide direct support to community-based organizations and other groups engaged in grassroots organizing or advocacy. They believe in community power-building work and prioritized it well before they started funding narrative change. Today, we believe all would agree with this assertion from a funder: “Narrative is an integral part of power building.” Or, as another put it, “At the grantmaking level we are building the capacity of organizations to build their own narrative power.”

Despite this broad alignment around community power-building, when it comes to narrative power-building, there are real differences in how funders approach making these kinds of investments.

Some funders we interviewed are making direct grants to community organizations to support their narrative change work. Others are bringing in practitioners to provide their grantees with technical assistance and training in narrative work. Almost all have included in their narrative change grantmaking the subset of organizations with extensive experience doing cultural change or narrative change work. Many are doing all of the above.

Our questions about community narrative power-building elicited a wide range of responses.

Funders who are making multi-year investments in building up the capacity of grassroots organizations often embrace a hybrid approach, where grassroots groups get funded directly and receive outside support from a trusted narrative expert. As one funder explained:

“First, we believe that communities are experts in their own narratives, so we listen to community members and advocates in how they tell their own stories and what their recommendations are on how to shift narratives. We have also partnered to address narrative change across many of our program areas. For example, we have partnered with a think tank that helps mission-driven organizations communicate about social issues in ways that build public will to support progressive change. In working with our team and grantees through their research, they are able to identify which language shifts we need to make in our communications, how certain phrases or terms are perceived by the public, and what issues stand in the way of effective communications across sectors.”

Or, as a different funder put it, “We aren’t funding narrative organizations, but we are funding grassroots organizations with explicit narrative components. Through the work with [a particular expert] we are also providing technical assistance for grassroots grantees.”

As noted earlier, 80 percent of the narrative intermediaries we surveyed work with both grantees and funders. Those with experience as organizers or close relationships with organizers are often preferred. “What drew us to working with [a particular expert] was their connection to grassroots organizing, their understanding of narrative as part of organizing strategy.”

One of the complications in funding grassroots organizations is the question of who the ideal narrators are.

Despite the overall eagerness to invest in community narrative power-building, it's complicated. One long-time narrative change funder noted that their views on the role of grassroots engagement in narrative work had changed over time. “I used to think everyone in the immigrant rights field needed to do [narrative work.] I don't think that any more.”

One of the complications in funding grassroots partners is the question of who the ideal narrators are. Storytelling in service of narrative can, of course, come from anywhere. A slogan on a sign or t-shirt can help tell a story; so can a canvassing script. Several funders saw the opportunity clearly. “It's important for [grassroots organizations] to be really clear about the underlying narratives they are trying to shift, then apply it to rap sheets at doors.”

But many funders also see real value in investing in expert storytellers, including artists and writers and performers. Because of the relationship between cultural and narrative change work (as we explore later in this report), we believe many funders are inclined to place a lot of the narrative responsibilities on impact storytellers, particularly at the national level. “We test mass ideas through mass media and our culture projects,” is how one funder explained it.

Storytelling by and for neighbors and other community members carries greater weight with its audience. It makes narrative tangible, while building community power.

The appeal here is scale; because narratives are shaped by and disseminated through mass media and mass culture, it is important to support efforts in those spaces. And because these projects are big and splashy, they tend to dominate the perception of what narrative change funding supports, even if the reality reflects greater balance between those efforts and community narrative power-building.

Storytelling at the local level typically lacks the reach of the other approaches. Advocates of this approach argue that what is lost in breadth is made up for in depth, as storytelling by and for neighbors and other community members carries greater weight with its audience. It makes narrative tangible, while building community power.

Grantees interviewed for one of the reports highlighted this dynamic. “There is a tension between building power in communities to help change narratives and scaling the reach of narrative campaigns through other tactics that are less community-driven.”

“Foundations are spending too much money and time on intellectually ‘getting it,’ strategy, research, et cetera, and not enough time on experimenting and the doing of narrative.”

Funders could leverage their public voice more; instead, most seem hesitant to speak out. As one explained, “It’s important for [our foundation] to say what we believe, to influence philanthropy, but it needs to be integrated with the grassroots.” We heard something similar from several funders. But being integrated with the grassroots can slow down the process of speaking out and that commitment can make funders less confident in their own voice.

Among those advocating greater investment in the grassroots are the intermediaries. In our survey, this was one of the main shortcomings several identified. “Foundations are spending too much money and time on intellectually ‘getting it,’ strategy, research, et cetera, and not enough time on experimenting and the doing of narrative. They need to spend a lot more money on grantmaking and convening in the field.” Another suggested one weakness of foundations is the “lack of rigor or consistency in their narrative strategy, particularly in how they engage in support for community-based narrative change work.” A third believed there is “not enough support to grassroots/organizing groups who need more to build narrative power.”

CREATING NARRATIVE ALIGNMENT: TOP DOWN VS BOTTOM UP

Regardless of who is receiving support for narrative change work, there is a tactical divide in how best to achieve a narrative shift. On the one hand, you have top down funders who settle on a narrative they believe in and then support efforts to inject that narrative into the media, the culture, and the movements. On the other hand, you have bottom up funders that are less prescriptive, investing in efforts to surface narrative challenges and solutions across a range of issues and/or within an issue.

“Starting in 2012 we invested in a lot of narrative work that framed health beyond health care. We were shifting narrative on health equity, introducing ideas around social determinants of health. Today this has become conventional.”

The first approach has some advantages, since narratives shift only when we tell enough stories that tap into a shared narrative. The Race Class Narrative, co-created by Anat Shenker-Osorio, Ian Haney Lopez, and Heather McGhee, holds that to build cross-racial solidarity, movements need to “discuss race overtly, frame racism as a tool to divide and thus harm us all, and connect unity to racial justice and economic prosperity.” When we asked about narratives they knew, this was the one most often cited among the funders. It is popular in movement circles for tackling a signal

challenge: how to tell a story that is widely resonant without choosing between racial justice and economic issues. It was also developed with significant support from racial justice funders of narrative change, which may account for some of its ubiquity among funders. “The Race Class Narrative research was helpful at [our foundation],” is a typical funder comment.

The community of funders we interviewed has been particularly invested in shifting the narrative around health. As one funder told us, “Ten years ago, almost no hospital CEOs were talking about social determinants of health. Now they at least publicly recognize these factors. Is that a change in narrative? Yes. Can we claim credit for it? No, but we contributed.” Another funder put it this way: “Starting in 2012 we invested in a lot of narrative work that framed health beyond health care. We were shifting narrative on health equity, introducing ideas around social determinants of health. Today this has become conventional.” A particular, chosen narrative promoted by funders, successfully shifted the narrative landscape over the course of a decade.

In our survey of intermediaries, when asked what funders are doing well, this directed approach was singled out. Funders are “focusing on narratives for specific movements.” Shifting narratives has long been a priority for funders of pop culture strategies. We saw this

in efforts to tell stories about immigrant families, rather than immigrant men; we saw it in efforts to tell different stories about cigarette smoking and helmet wearing and condom usage. Funders played a significant role in shifting public attitudes around marriage equality.

It can come across to grantees as heavy handed if dollars are attached to a particular narrative approach that may not resonate.

However, it can come across to grantees as heavy handed if dollars are attached to a particular narrative approach that may not resonate. Also, this process of developing a narrative can be informed more by practitioners and their research than by the expertise of communities.

This concern was raised by narrative power building grantees in California. In a recent report they articulated “specific, actionable items for funders to consider... In brief, they center the concept of placing more trust, control, and flexibility in grantees and the ecosystem of narrative change partners. This includes allowing time for the processes to happen organically; offering flexibility; being okay with experiments, even ones that fail; not dictating the issue or messages; letting go of the focus on common messages...”

Without some guidance or coordination, some funders worry about the ways organizations doing good work can inadvertently reinforce harmful dominant narratives.

A more bottom up approach to surfacing narratives involves strengthening the institutions through which narratives take root, including independent media companies or organizations of community-based artists. “For the journalism fund, it’s less about a particular narrative, more about building power among BIPOC media companies and journalists,” suggested a funder collaborative, referencing

one of its funds. “We know one of the barriers to community power is the xenophobia and anti-Blackness. Part of our intervention is around building more abundance in BIPOC media.” Investments in pop culture-focused non-profits implementing narrative strategies that seed more diverse creators can also reveal new, powerful narratives and narrative vehicles.

An interesting example of a bottom up narrative shift that began at the grassroots and gained momentum through mass media and popular culture comes from the racial justice work of the Equal Justice Initiative. “Bryan Stevenson has been doing tremendous work on the narrative front,” noted one national funder. “We consider [Stevenson and his organization] leaders in

raising up the reality of racial violence, countering American exceptionalism. Telling the story that ‘slavery never ended, it just evolved’ has been phenomenally important.”

Yet without some guidance or coordination, some funders worry about the ways organizations doing good work can inadvertently reinforce harmful dominant narratives. One funder provided this example: “In the housing space, we find with homelessness the dominant narrative is that [homelessness] results from an individual decision and so they deserve to be homeless. We want to move toward an understanding of homelessness as a failure of multiple systems. Therefore, stories without connection to systemic issues unintentionally reinforce negative ideas. We need to tie stories to a structural cause and a solution.”

“Narrative and culture has always been very clear to me, as an immigrant. Learning about U.S. narratives came from TV, or the supermarket, watching how people interact, et cetera. It’s one thing to understand that, it’s another to know how to fund it.”

The compromise solution is to do a bit of both, with an assist from intermediaries. Grassroots partners provide the stories and practical know-how that comes from working in communities; intermediaries bring research and data and lessons learned from across the country. This more or less mirrors how funders have been balancing their commitment to grassroots organizations and narrative experts thus far. But, as one funder told us, it’s not easy. “Narrative and culture has always been very clear to me, as an immigrant. Learning about U.S. narratives came from TV, or the supermarket, watching how people interact, et cetera. It’s one thing to understand that, it’s another to know how to fund it.”

CULTURE IS ONE KEY GATEWAY TO NARRATIVE

Why did funders begin to support narrative change work? Where exactly did this field come from? While we did not seek to answer these questions in any kind of comprehensive way, the origin story we surfaced through our interviews and literature review helps to clarify some structural dynamics that have shaped the field as it exists today.

As we noted earlier, among the funders we interviewed, those with the longest history supporting cultural change work date it to around 2008. Foundations that were early investors in artists and other cultural creators as agents of social change, like the Ford

There is considerable overlap between narrative and cultural change. Artists were supported at least in part as storytellers, and storytelling was central to shifting narrative.

Foundation and Unbound Philanthropy, saw the opportunity to fund narrative change work before others. “Storytelling became a part of the work [at Ford], experimenting with funding projects that were using different expressions of culture. They were telling different stories about immigrants or immigration system.”

There has long been philanthropic support for the arts, including art as a medium for social change. Watchdog groups focused on media and Hollywood, like GLAAD, have been around for decades. Ultimately both are concerned with

storytelling, which is a critical piece of the narrative change puzzle. As funding for culture change work got more organized in the late 2000s and early 2010s, many of those funders added narrative change to their philanthropic portfolios. As one funder described it to us, “there was not one lightbulb moment, more of a slow creeping into the narrative space.”

Here is how one of the earlier narrative change funders described the field in the late 2000s. “Our involvement with narrative began with storytelling in mid-2008. It was a part of a strategy but it wasn’t called narrative change. We were supporting the leadership of undocumented people, survivors of the broken immigration system. And the way they were organizing themselves to tell their stories was changing the way people saw them. Success in this kind of storytelling was so powerful, others picked up on it. We supported their partnerships with visual artists, filmmakers, musicians, to tell stories in different ways on different platforms.”

This is one of the reasons why there is considerable overlap between narrative and cultural change. Artists were supported at least in part as storytellers, and storytelling was central to shifting narrative. Most of the experts in narrative are also experts in cultural strategy, and vice versa. The program officers involved in funding one are usually involved in funding the other.

An outcome of this overlap is an analysis of narrative change that centers cultural infrastructure and content as its primary drivers. Therefore, just as the Race Class Narrative was the most cited narrative among funders and practitioners, creating change through interventions in Hollywood is the most well known engagement framework. This has led to some tension, as we noted earlier, between investments in grassroots narrative power building and investments in pop culture strategies.

It has also created some difference of opinion among grassroots partners and practitioners about the relationship between narrative and cultural change. Again, from a report that interviewed narrative change grantees:

Interviewees understood the relationship between cultural and narrative change strategies in very different ways. For some, cultural work needs to be integrated into any narrative change work and seen as core to shifting narratives. This has implications for how it is funded and staffed within an organization or with partners. The interviewees from grassroots organizations highlighted the importance of cultural work happening in partnership with people who have authentic stories to share. For others, cultural work is a specific tactic, one of many, to deploy in the context of a narrative change strategy. For one interviewee, cultural change is the strategy and narrative shifts are a means to make progress toward cultural change.

The wider embrace of funding for narrative change was also inspired by the Trump campaign, his administration, and the racial justice uprisings. All provided real life examples of the power of narrative in shaping public opinion, with Trump's skill with narrative helping to set back efforts to advance health equity and racial justice, among other priorities. "We have always had a major strategic communications piece," one funder told us. "In 2016, after the election, there was a lot of conversation and concern about the impact of media and narratives from Trump. Our initial ideas were around investing in journalism and media, but we didn't pursue them. In 2018, in figuring out what to do in this moment, we started looking at culture and narrative change." Another funder agreed. "[Since Trump] there is renewed interest among funders around immigration and narrative. A lot of soul searching about how immigration has become a third rail."

A different foundation had a similar story. "We began working on this in 2016 with Race Class Narrative work. We were pushing back against the narrative of 'white people being left behind.' We needed to win on a pro-race analysis. Don't leave white people behind and don't ignore people of color."

"In 2016, after the election, there was a lot of conversation and concern about the impact of media and narratives from Trump... In 2018, in figuring out what to do in this moment, we started looking at culture and narrative change."

Specific Findings

“WE ARE THIRSTY”

Across the board, from funders to practitioners, there is an eagerness to better understand this field. We were told this explicitly by almost every person we spoke to. In particular, funders were interested in how other funders were handling the challenge of funding grassroots organizations to do narrative change work. This sums it up well: “We are thirsty, we are not the experts in this. We’re figuring it out as we go along. There’s a gap in our capacity and knowledge in this area.”

“There are many working in narrative strategies, but few have been for long.”

As noted earlier, some of the funders we spoke with consider themselves well informed about narrative change, but most identified as “still learning” and were eager to better understand best practices and prevailing norms. A former funder widely considered one of the founders of the field observed: “There are many [funders] working in narrative strategies, but few have been for long.”

Other funders are feeling pressure to learn from those they have been funding. One told us, “much of the narrative focus has come from grantees, organizers asking about where popular beliefs come from; why certain stories are dominant. [The foundation’s] team has been figuring out how to resource that.”

NARRATIVE CHANGE IS A LONG-TERM PROPOSITION

When we asked funders how long they expected it to take to shift a narrative, most said between ten and twenty years. A few described it as a “generational” effort. None said less than a decade. One of the funders who was involved in shorter term funding stopped supporting narrative change efforts in part because they realized they weren’t in it for long enough to make a difference.

Despite the agreement among funders that narrative change takes time, two of the practitioners we surveyed argued that they aren’t matching this timeline with long-term funding. One practitioner indicated that funders are suffering from “MASSIVE near-sightedness, not appreciating whatsoever just how much of a long game narrative work is (when’s the last time you worked with a progressive foundation that committed 10 or 20 years of investment to a body of work?)” The other practitioner said funders were “not realizing the length of time

that using narrative to change culture takes or the scale of investment required.” We address this need in the first “Sticky Issue” in the recommendations.

DESIRE FOR GREATER ALIGNMENT WITHIN AND ACROSS FOUNDATIONS

We did not find many foundations with a program officer who was in charge of the narrative change portfolio for the entire foundation. Even foundations that had a person with a focus on narrative change often had other programs that were incorporating narrative change strategies. Often the program officer we interviewed admitted not knowing who else was funding narrative work within the foundation.

Often the program officer we interviewed admitted not knowing who else was funding narrative work within the foundation.

There are almost no funder tables focused solely on narrative change, although there are several tables organized around a particular issue, like immigration or gender or climate or health equity, that have made narrative a priority. According to funders, communication across tables is rare.

“I want to acknowledge that a lot happens at [this foundation] that I don't have insight into,” a funder told us. “We make hundreds of grants a year, so different programs may support narrative change work I'm not aware of.” Another funder pointed out that “we have nine different funds, so there are a variety of things going on regarding narrative... Each has different methodologies.”

The lack of internal alignment around best practices is mirrored by divergent views about what narrative change work is. As one funder said, “A lot of people are saying they are interested... but that can include a lot of different things. Messages are not the same as changing narratives or narrative systems. In the democracy space, people use narrative as a catch all. But developing digital outreach products isn't a direct path to narrative change.”

This issue is addressed in one of the reports we read. “This is not surprising in an emergent field, where there are no ‘best practices’ or widely agreed upon ways of advancing change. The diversity of approaches makes it difficult to tell one story about where California’s narrative change capacity exists, what is needed, and how it might be strengthened.” We do our best to consolidate some of the most popular definitions and practices in the [Definition of Terms on page 6](#) of this report.

AUDIENCE IS EMERGING AS GREATER FOCUS

In 2014, the authors of a [Culture Group report](#) noted: “Politics is where some of the people are some of the time. Culture is where most of the people are most of the time.” So, how do we reach “most of the people?”

Funders and practitioners are being intentional about who the stories are reaching. They are finding ways to maximize the size of the audience and with it the reach of these stories.

We heard funders and practitioners suggest that “audience” is becoming a greater focus in two ways. First, they are being intentional about who the stories are reaching. Second, they are finding ways to maximize the size of the audience and with it the reach of these stories. There is a lot of interest in reaching “persuadable” audiences,

since narrative shift requires an audience that is receptive to a different narrative. Interviewees told us that not all audiences are worth our collective time. Investment in audience segmentation has allowed impact storytellers to more effectively target the ideal audiences. At the same time, narrative researchers have gained a more nuanced understanding of how these stories are being received.

Most often, being intentional about who will be receptive to a particular narrative means ignoring “opposition” audiences, while occasionally it means skipping over the “base” that is already aligned. The interest in mass audiences is rooted in the belief that narratives are nearly invisible, embedded in our culture and media. And therefore a successful shift can occur only when narratives become ubiquitous.

According to a leading researcher who works with many of the foundations we interviewed, “People in the [narrative change] space are eager for info on audience.” A comprehensive report recently commissioned by a significant funder of narrative work included this line: “We already know a lot about audiences and measurement and “what works” — but too often that knowledge is isolated and highly academic and technical.”

One funding collaborative has developed a narrative-shifting fund that requires applicants to incorporate plans to reach mass audiences as a prerequisite to receiving support. This represents a major step away from the “content first, audience... last” approach, which saw a significant amount of money being spent on content creation and very little money spent on content delivery.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Convergence Partnership shaped this report to reflect back to philanthropy and narrative practitioners a collective picture of our approaches to narrative challenges related to racial justice and health equity. We already know that getting to narrative change at the scale and sophistication necessary to shape a just society means making long-term investments (at many orders of magnitude greater than currently available) in institutions, community-based organizations, individuals and distribution platforms nationwide. Everything related to narrative change on issues at the heart of American identity needs more funding.

The key question: how can we shape narrative strategy and investments to fuel future-oriented, constructive organizing, policy, and power relations? In that vein, we offer a conceptual framework for thinking through narrative strategy, followed by three “sticky” problems that, if solved, could provide leverage for consolidating current strategies and aligning investments.

A Framework

Seeking a way to categorize narrative approaches, we see that foundations have invested heavily in one or more of the following.



As was noted in the findings, “creating change through interventions in Hollywood is the most well known engagement framework,” represented here by the category of mass culture. At the same time, non-fiction books (like Heather McGhee’s *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*) and articles that advance the Race Class Narrative have seen real success engaging the public. In our framework, this kind of content falls into the category of mass media.

Fleshing out how narrative change can be (and has been) achieved through mass movements is part of the work in front of us. Regional foundations and grassroots organizations have a major role to play here, given their proximity to community-based movement work.

Elsewhere in the findings we look at community narrative power building—the effort to equip everyday people with the tools to make and act on narrative decisions. While there is deep commitment to investing in this approach, represented here by the mass movement category, there are also complications. Fleshing out how narrative change can be (and has been) achieved through mass movements is part of the work in front of us. Regional foundations and grassroots organizations have a major role to play here, given their proximity to community-based movement work.

We will not make significant change without building all three kinds of narrative power, hopefully operating in concert with each other for maximum impact. Our audiences should not be able to go anywhere without encountering our ideas and stories. That kind of saturation, combined with clear paths to action, will change the environment and make more ambitious policy achievable and enduring.

**NARRATIVE
POWER
BUILDING:
A FRAMEWORK**



PURPOSE

Shift narratives through journalism and non-fiction media, such as books and documentary film

Shift narratives through storytelling in entertainment venues such as TV, film, and music

Shift narratives through new stories by organizing and inspiring collective action, art, and culture

TACTICS

Subsidies for high-impact non-fiction books or podcasts

Reporter briefings on how to cover an issue

Direct funding of outlets such as hyper local and Spanish-language news

Staff in production centers like Los Angeles

Place issue and community experts into writers rooms

Challenge mass culture misrepresentation of communities

Organizing mass protests

Local, community-based art and culture production

Crafting demands that stretch the system in desired direction

EXAMPLES

Solutions Journalism Project

Media Matters

National associations of reporters of color

National Domestic Workers Alliance *Roma* campaign

Define American work on Superstore

Color of Change report “Race in the Writers Room”

Public journeys (immigrants “walk to stay home”)

AIDS Quilt

“Defund the Police demand of racial justice uprisings”

**INDICATORS
OF IMPACT**

Increase in community voices and stories

Reduction in racial code words

Greater focus on systems, less on individuals, as root cause of challenges

Increase in stories by and about groups and their experiences

Compelling, empathetic dramatization of controversial issues

Reduction in number of character stereotypes

Visibility of BIPOC-led grassroots organizations

Stories from everyday people

New concepts/language go mainstream

Deciding which categories of mass engagement a foundation will invest in is a complex alignment process, but we need to do it. Grantees and social movement strategists are making the same calculations based on their interests and their own power analysis.

A quantitative analysis of how much funding goes to which strategy is beyond the scope of this report. But it's not beyond the scope of each individual foundation or funder table. A simple literature review suggests that mass culture and mass media receive the largest share of narrative investments. Certainly these are the most visible of the three, documented through research and with clearly identifiable national leaders.

We point this out not to argue for rebalancing investments (because all three need expansion) or for redundant funder tables, but to give foundations a framework through which to clarify their own approaches to narrative change. "If we fund x, y will happen." Deciding which categories of mass engagement a foundation will invest in is a complex alignment process, but we need to do it. Grantees and social movement strategists are making the same calculations based on their interests and their own power analysis. While any individual foundation can focus anywhere, we humbly suggest that part of philanthropy's role here is to ensure that the entire ecosystem is robustly funded.

Three Sticky Issues

To that end, we encountered three especially challenging debates in the current landscape. If we, funders and practitioners concerned with racial justice and health equity, could resolve these questions, we could ease the path to greater investment and more investors.

1

There is a lack of clarity in the relationship between strategic communications and long-term narrative change to enable greater alignment among practitioners, researchers, and funders.

The first is a short-term approach, often driven by legislative timelines. The second is a long-term approach. Ideally, as one intermediary told us, people making short-term decisions would do it with the long-term in mind, and vice versa. Narrative change strategies simply won't take off if they're not reading the strategic communications room. Strategic communications will always be limited by its inability to change or at least contest the dominant ideas shaping the society. Putting some energy into figuring out how these two pieces of the ecosystem fit together would also enable better case-making for all three elements of this framework.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS vs NARRATIVE CHANGE

Strategic Communications	Narrative Change
Time bound 6 months to 3 years	Decades broken into smaller chunks
Attached to current policy processes and demands	Can influence policies but tries to create a new lasting authorizing environment for ambitious changes
Run by communications directors, content creators and message researchers	Led by everyday narrators, long term strategists and organizers
Based on currently shared values	Tries to elevate or establish new values, and get them shared
Is one social change strategy among others, including advocacy, organizing, and cultural change	Helps shape storytelling across all social change strategies, including communications

2 **Narrative landscapes and models need to be made available in accessible formats for faster replication, with a focus on moving, neutralizing or challenging particular audiences.** There’s a lot of overlap among narrative threads that come into play across issues and communities. Individualism vs collectivism, self-reliance vs. community care, and similar thematic conflicts arise repeatedly. Landing on “the narrative we’re trying to move” is a bear for most practitioners. To help speed up narrative alignment processes we need narrative modeling that allows strategists to avoid reinventing the wheel.

3 **Measuring effectiveness:** There is now a large body of research on the impact of television shows, documentary films, and news coverage on the public perception of particular people or communities (e.g.: immigrants, LGBTQ people, victims of police violence). But there are other mass culture and mass media spaces where narrative interventions are less well studied (e.g.: gaming, books, music), while the mass movement strategy has only the most nascent set of metrics emerging. The field would benefit from serious, fast-moving, iterative, well-documented experiments that answer the question, “How do we know it’s working?” We should count the number of skilled narrators in many different arenas, recast particular constituencies and players from the traditional narrative, and measure the seeding of movement concepts into mainstream culture or media.



METHODOLOGY

Our methodology included interviews with more than twenty foundations and funder collaborative staff, a survey that went to leading intermediary practitioners, and follow up interviews with three intermediaries. We also reviewed several reports that explored similar issues. We started by identifying the foundations that were actively pursuing health equity and racial justice, or related “social determinants of health” issues, including affordable housing or immigration. We interviewed twenty philanthropies of varying sizes and locations, including a few local or regional foundations. See list in appendix.

Several of these foundations were local or regional to the Midwest and the South, helping us reach beyond the national centers on the coasts for a more diverse picture of how narrative strategy plays out in communities themselves. These foundations are interested in saturating narratives, but their unit of change might be as small as a neighborhood. For example, if enough neighborhoods in a city were to adopt a theme like “we keep us safe,” it would result in mass engagement.

Our interview protocol and survey were designed to uncover the issues worked on, the definitions in use, what drove foundations to incorporate or drop narrative change as a strategy, and what they’ve found rewarding or challenging. With intermediaries, we created a survey asking about their observations of the narrative change field, who funds their work with different parts of the organizing or advocacy ecosystem, and their perspective on how foundations have approached narrative change. We interviewed a small number of intermediaries to go deeper on these questions. The vast majority of interviews were conducted by at least two people on the research team. We recorded all interviews, and participants were assured of anonymity. See protocol and survey questions in the appendix.

The Narrative Initiative network team then sorted and organized themes and quotes from the interview notes to create an initial set of findings. They drafted those and reviewed them with the Convergence Partnership staff and steering committee, received their feedback to shape the recommendations and produced the final copy.



APPENDICES

Appendix A: Foundations Interviewed

Ford Foundation

Conrad Hilton Foundation

JPB Foundation

Kansas Health Foundation

Kresge Foundation

Open Society Foundations

The California Endowment

Unbound Philanthropy

Appendix B: Tables and Funder Collaboratives Interviewed

CA Funders for Boys and Men of Color

California Gender Justice Funder Collaborative

Collaborative for Gender and Reproductive Equity

Four Freedoms Fund

Funders for Housing and Opportunity

Grantmakers in Health

Grantmakers in the Arts

International Resource for Impact and Storytelling

Justice Funders

Narrative Change Action Table (housed at Executives Alliance for Boys and Men of Color)

Pop Culture Collaborative

Racial Equity in Journalism Fund at Borealis Philanthropy

Solidaire Network

Women's Funding Network, Economic Mobility Action Network

Appendix C: Intermediaries Surveyed or Interviewed

Center for Cultural Power

Center for Story Based Strategy

Culture Surge

Frameworks

Goodwin Simon

Harmony Labs

Jumpslide Strategies

Liz Manne Strategy

Moore + Associates

Narrative Arts

Narrative Initiative

ORS Impact

Reframe

The Opportunity Agenda

Appendix D: Literature Review

The Culture Group. (2014). [Making Waves: A Guide to Cultural Strategy](#). Air Traffic Control Fund.

FrameWorks Institute. (2021). [The Features of Narratives: A Model of Narrative Form for Social Change Efforts](#). FrameWorks Institute.

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ORS Impact, [Measuring Narrative Change: Understanding Progress and Navigating Complexity](#), February 2021

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Robinson, R. (2018). [Changing Our Narrative About Narrative: the Infrastructure Required for Building Narrative Power](#). Institute of Othering & Belonging.

Wainwright, C. (2019). [Building Narrative Power for Racial Justice and Health Equity](#). Open Society Foundations.

Appendix E: Interview Protocols

I. FOR TABLE PARTICIPANTS AND STAFF

When did narrative change become a priority? What was the rationale for adding it to your priorities? Were any other funding strategies downgraded at the same time?

How do you define “narrative” and “narrative change?” What’s your theory of narrative change and where did it come from? What is an example you would use to describe the kind of narrative change you are seeking? Are you focused on shifting a single narrative or multiple narratives?

Are there particular frameworks or methodologies you apply to narrative work? What are they and where did they come from?

What are your evaluation standards for narrative change work? Where did they come from?

How long do you imagine narrative work takes? A month, a year, a generation? How does your approach reflect this?

What tools are you using to create narrative change? Are you funding narrative change work among your grantees? Providing grantees with expert practitioners?

Do you speak publicly as an institution? If so, has your approach to narrative change impacted your public voice/institutional messaging? If so, how?

How should narrative change work relate to other social change tactics, like organizing and advocacy? How should narrative change work relate to messaging and communications? What do you do to encourage this?

II. FOR FOUNDATIONS

What are the issues your foundation works on?

What is your definition of narrative, narrative change, and narrative strategy or

narrative? What does it include/exclude?

Which experts on narrative do you work with?

Tell us about the development of your narrative strategy. When did you start?

What was the rationale for digging in?

What tables or networks are you part of that have prioritized narrative as one of their funding areas?

Do you make grants related to narrative development or execution? If yes, can you share three grantees in which you are significantly invested?

III. FOR PRACTITIONERS

Are there particular frameworks or methodologies you apply to narrative work? What are they and where did they come from? What is your definition of narrative strategy? What does it include/exclude?

When do you know it's working? What are your evaluation standards for narrative change work? Where did they come from?

How long do you imagine narrative work takes? A month, a year, a generation? How does your approach reflect this view of time?

Who are you working with? How do you define working relationships (eg partners, clients, constituents) ?

What is your role in the narrative development of that sector? (eg training, consulting, implementing, direct, intermediary)

How are your engagements paid for (grants, work for hire)?

Who are your top funders?

What narrative capacities do you think are strong in the sector?

What narrative capacities need to be built?

How do you think philanthropy is doing?

IV. PRACTITIONER SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. Your name

2. Your organization and its role

3. Your roles

- Content creator
- Trainer
- Strategist/impact producer
- Communications staff or consultant
- Researcher

4. What elements of narrative strategy do you work on?

- Narrative landscape assessment
- Narrative infrastructure or capacity assessment
- Building organizational capacity
- Connecting activists and creatives
- Crafting narrative strategy
- Crafting strategic communications
- Content creation
- Translating narratives into messaging or stories
- Audience Research
- Impact Research
- Content/Message Testing
- Evaluation of efficacy of narrative change efforts
- Other:

5. What is your approach to narrative work? Or What is the lineage of your narrative approach?

- Organizing grounded narrative strategy
- Pop culture
- Public narrative
- Race Class Narrative

6. What are the issues you/your organization currently work on? (Check as many as apply)

- Economy: Labor, Public Benefits
- Health/healthcare
- Housing
- Environment/Climate/ Climate justice
- Food
- Transportation
- Care work
- Criminal justice/abolition
- War/militarism
- Foreign policy
- Education
- Voting rights
- Immigration
- Racial justice broadly/multi issue
- Abortion/reproductive justice
- Women's rights
- LGBTIQ rights
- Indigenous sovereignty
- Corporate controls/ accountability
- Campaign finance
- Digital privacy/ Security
- Mis- / Dis-information
- Freedom of the press/ Journalism
- Other:

7. Drop in your definition of narrative here:

8. How do you sustain the work financially?

- Foundation grants
- Foundation contracts
- Earned revenue/contracts from organizations
- Small individual donors or membership
- Large individual donors

8. Are you part of any narrative collaborations or coalitions or tables that hold key narrative goals? Please list.

9. If foundations are part of your financial model, please answer following:

Who are your top funders for narrative work

- Ford
- OSF
- Robert Wood Johnson
- California Wellness
- MacArthur
- Gates
- Hewlett
- Nathan Cummings
- Andrew Mellon
- Surdna
- Other:

Do you raise general support or project money?

- More general support
- More project grants

10. What do you see as narrative strengths of the movements you work with?

- Great narrators
- Clear social change goals
- Great stories
- Clear strategy
- Long term
- Other, please list

11. What do you see as narrative weaknesses of the movements you work with?

- Weak/ no narrative alignment
- Hard to fit into timescale of campaigning
- It's nobody's job
- No clear value to narrative investments
- No story collection mechanism
- Siloing of narrative /programs / organizing/ comms work
- Other please list



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