



NARRATIVE
POWER
& collective
ACTION

Conversations with people
working to change narratives
for social good

Part 1 of 2

STORIES & NARRATIVES
are too OFTEN used to
SHUT DOWN CONVERSATIONS.

WE WANT to EXPLORE HOW they
CAN BE USED to OPEN DIALOGUE
& CREATE, NOT SHRINK,
SPACE for DEBATE.



For better or worse, narratives are a powerful force. But recently perhaps it's felt more like for the worse than better. Here, we want to talk about power of narrative and collective action for positive change.

Our starting point is civic space and defence of human rights. We held conversations with people across different sectors and disciplines – from activists and strategists to scientists

and marketers – to learn about their work in the narrative change space.

This publication is a collection of these conversations. It reveals fascinating insights, stories and strategies from their day-to-day work. Whether you're a narrative change specialist, or a front-line activist, we believe there's a lot to learn from and be inspired by in these conversations.

MEET the PEOPLE WORKING to CHANGE NARRATIVES Around the World



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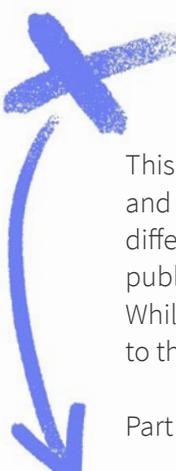
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MORE CONVERSATIONS IN PART TWO



This is part one of a two-part collection of curated conversations on narrative power and collective action. We had so many fantastic conversations with people across different sectors and geographies, , we wanted to give people time to read and digest by publishing in two parts. We hope these conversations will spark reflection and discussion. While reading, ask yourself 'what do these conversations bring to me, and what do I bring to the conversation?'

Part two will feature conversations with:

THE DATA ACTIVIST

Renata Ávila

[Guatemala]

THE FEMINIST ACADEMICS

Linda Guisa & Nita Luci

[Kosovo]

THE FEMINIST FUNDER

Sophia Hernández

[Mexico]

THE FILMMAKER

Waad Al-Kateab

[UK/Syria]

THE JOURNALIST

Rohini Mohan

[India]

THE MOVEMENT CONNECTOR

Alejandra Alayza

[Peru]

THE MULTIMEDIA

COMMUNICATOR

Ahmer Khan

[India]

THE MUSIC PRODUCER

Orlando Higginbottom

[US/UK]

THE NARRATIVE
CHANGE FUNDER

Brett Davidson

[US]

THE NARRATIVE
STRATEGIST

Rachel Weidinger

[US]

THE SELF-ADVOCATES

**Morgan Maze
& Dewi Tjakrawinata**

[Indonesia]

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

'Narrative power and collective action' is published as part of a collaboration between Oxfam and On Think Tanks. Isabel Crabtree-Condor, Knowledge Broker at Oxfam, started the project, interviewing 20+ people about their role in shaping narratives. This work is part of Oxfam's work on protecting and opening civic space. On Think Tanks has helped to transform these interviews into a set of curated conversations and publication. The publication process was

managed by Erika Perez-Leon, OTT Director of Communications. Conversations were edited by Louise Ball, and the publication was designed by the talented Magda Castría. Some of the artwork was commissioned by Fine Acts for their Spring of Hope project.

We'd like to thank especially all those featured in the publication for their time and contributions. Their knowledge, insights and courage have been truly inspiring.



Scan to sign up to our mailing list to receive part two in your inbox, and invitations to join our virtual conversations on different dimensions of narrative power and collective action – such as narratives and identity, race, climate, film making, fake news, brands and more. You can also share ideas for topics you'd like to talk and learn more about.

the KNOWLEDGE BROKER



— Isabel Crabtree -Condor

Isabel is a cultural connector and bridge builder with British-Peruvian roots. As a knowledge broker she connects across different cultures, languages and areas of work to support people to learn from each other and recognise the power of their own knowledge and know-how. She works for Oxfam, an international confederation of 20 NGOs, working with partners in over 90 countries to end injustices that cause poverty. She loves memes.

[Editorial]

'We see narrative being used to reclaim power and create new spaces for conversation. This anthology is packed with examples of how that is happening. What other ones are you seeing in your world right now? How are you engaging with them?'

'Narrative power and collective action' is a collection of curated conversations between Isabel Crabtree-Condor, a Knowledge Broker at Oxfam, and a diverse group of people working in the narrative change and collective action space. This editorial is based on a conversation between the editor, Louise Ball, and Isabel, to find out more about the motivations behind the publication and what she and her organisation has learned from the conversations.

For as long as I can remember, I've understood stories as a way to connect with people – I saw them used to disempower and empower, to injure and to heal. As for many people, stories were my entry point for getting to grips with narratives.

It's as if there's something invisible holding things in place, preventing change from happening. For me, understanding narratives and what lies behind or under them, is one way of digging more consciously into that invisible web of forces that maintain the status quo.

How did you find the collaborators?

First, I set out to speak to people who had been vocal or visible on the topic.

When I started, I didn't really know much about narratives. As I ventured into the unknown, I met a new character, and that person would help me to understand a bit more, then they'd give me directions to the next stop.

You start to see a landscape of people working on narrative change across culture production, marketing, framing, storytelling, strategic communicators, movement starters, connectors, the list goes on.

And what emerged for me was how narrative work is used by different groups to keep ideas in place or to propose alternative ways of thinking about, looking at, or acting on issues.

Why are you interested in narratives and civic space?

As an organisation, Oxfam is exploring how to more effectively understand and respond to changes in civic space in different contexts. One of the drivers of closing civic space was linked to the power of certain narratives.

For us, civic space is the structures, institutions and enabling conditions that support people to be active citizens. Where people can come together, organise, speak out and act individually and collectively. It's the freedom (and right) to assemble, associate and speak out, which some of us are able to enjoy more than others. Civic space is expressed in the streets, in neighbourhood groups and community spaces, formal organisations, and grassroots or global movements.

We see compelling narratives that connect to old and deep forms of power, prejudice and fear. These are being used to undermine civil society work, and to attack activists and people claiming their human rights.

They are also being used to persuade people that the status quo is inevitable, change is not possible, and participation or activism is pointless. They keep ideas that don't serve the majority in place.

Populist rhetoric is increasingly visible. It taps into people's emotions and values, sometimes even using human rights language. This hurts solidarity, peace and social justice efforts.



We are interested in understanding this better and in testing the assumption that if specific narratives are used to close space, they can also be used to open space.

It's not all bad news, is it?

I hope this anthology of perspectives shows that we can all be part of creating new narratives. Regardless of where you sit and what you do.

Narratives are not something that happens over there. We are part of them and they are part of us. That means we can reinforce or challenge them. The question is: can we do it consciously, with others, and can we do it better? Absolutely.

Engaging with diverse perspectives can create exits from our echo chambers. If we are only talking to ourselves and people who are like us then our 'us' is not big, diverse or dynamic.

We see narratives being used to reclaim power and create new spaces for conversation. This anthology is packed with examples of how that is happening. What other ones are you seeing in your world right now? How are you engaging with them?

CONNECTIONS BETWEEN CONVERSATIONS

Narratives are a form of power

If there is one thing that I take away from this whole exercise, it's that power is central to this work.

It's one of the first things I learned about narratives from the feminist approach, and it has really stayed with me.

Narratives can mobilise and connect, as well as divide and isolate. Social, public or dominant narratives help to legitimise existing power relationships, prop them up, and make them seem natural.

It's useful to think of narratives in terms of power, because then collective action and creative collaboration are clearly the only way to go if we want to reroute or disrupt these power dynamics.

Narrative power through collective action

The good news is that there are loads of cool creative collaborations under way, and as a collective we hope to support many more.

Connecting with people who are different to us can really strengthen our collective action and creative potential.

Narrative knowledge and framing know-how can help us to open civic space, collaborate better, and amplify other voices, helping us to be part of the biggest ‘us’ we can be.

This work is beyond the scope of one organisation or sector. To shift or change sticky narratives that keep the status quo in place is going to require collaboration and creative collective action at a scale not seen before.

Narratives play a role in closing the space to speak out

Many of the conversations talked about how narratives are being used to close the space to speak out. But this also means they are an important way to understand and influence this space for collective action.

Rather than trying to counter these harmful narratives, we might want to focus our energy on collective action to create new or alternative narratives that focus on our values and what we stand for.

And it’s not enough to just talk authentically about our values, or what we stand for, we have to do things differently too. We have to bring those values to life every day, or expect to be called out for it. Doing what you say is important, it builds trust.

Narratives hold ideas in place and they are also made by us

Narratives are made up of many stories, tweets, visuals, videos, memes, online content, offline conversations, keeping deeply held ideas about society and people in place.

In a crises people are more open than ever to narratives that activate them to feel and

act on fear. But also, narratives that direct them to feel and act on hope and empathy.

There are different routes to shifting narratives. Who you walk with and how you get there are also going to be important in determining who can see themselves in the new narrative you want to share.

Values can guide collective action and strengthen narratives

In a few of the conversations people mention hope, joy, love, and empathy as values that we need to hold onto and bring to life in our collective work. That’s something we can all just start doing now.

It’s also not about telling people how to do things or that their way is incorrect. There’s often reasons people believe what they believe. Values help us to connect with people on a different level.

Unless we start listening better, understanding more, acting in line with what we believe in, we won’t get out of this polarised situation.

THERE’S A LOT OF CONVERSATIONS, HOW SHOULD I READ THIS PUBLICATION?

A bit like a book of poetry, you don’t need to read this from cover to cover in one sitting. You obviously can if you want to. But go at the pace you need to.

Maybe start by looking for perspectives that are different to yours, they might surprise you.

If people learn something new from this publication, or it helps someone to reflect

WHY DO DELEGITIMIZING STORIES, FRAMES, LABELS MATTER?

Strong activism
+ Strong foundations
+ Extra support
from society

Activism undermined
by stories about
activists + Narratives

Dominant narratives
at work = Easier to attack
= Less public protection
= Less support = ...



on their practice, to perhaps see something they didn't see before, or to see it in a new way, then that is of huge value to me.

Of course, there are nice practical tips and tricks that are going to turn your head in the conversations too!

From this project we have learned the crazy power of conversation. We don't make enough time for them, yet conversations are the bedrock of collaboration and connection.

So, the next step for this work is to use this publication to build a global conversation around the power of narrative and collective action. We want you to be part of it.

I encourage people reading this to ask themselves: what can this offer me? And what can I offer this conversation?

Oh, and we also have another 11 fantastic conversations in the works for part two, so look out for that. ■

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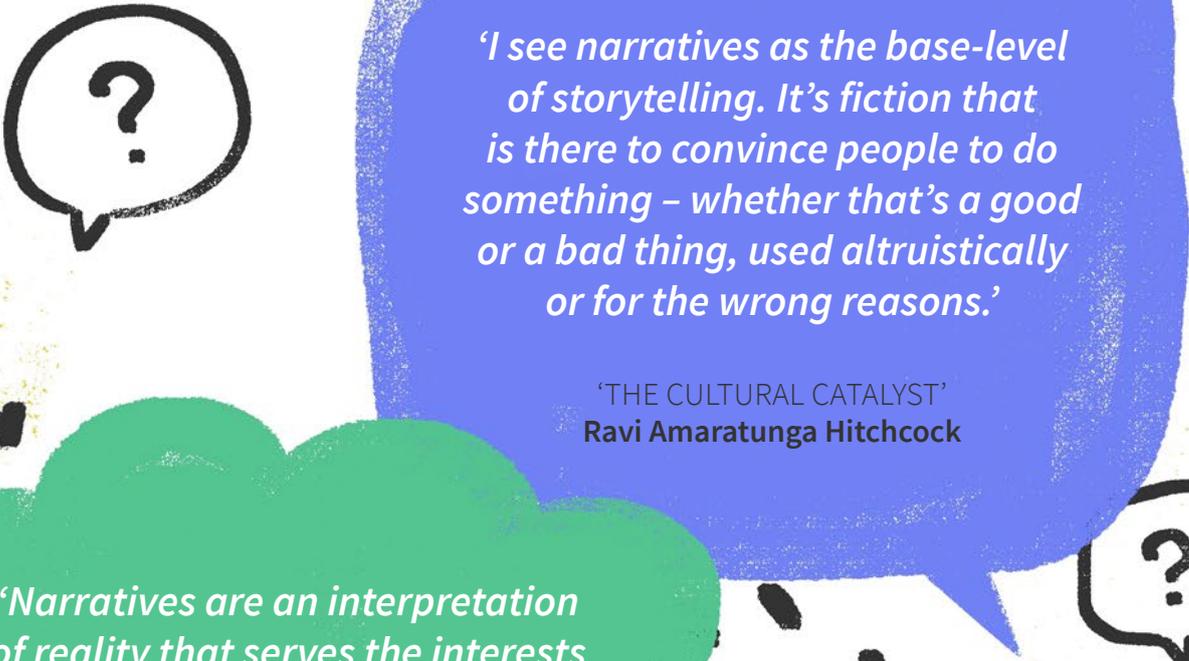
WHAT are NARRATIVES?

'Narratives are about invisible power. How perceptions, belief systems and ideology shape the way people define what is "right" and what is "wrong".'

'THE BLACK FEMINIST QUEER INTERNATIONALIST'
Phumi Mtetwa

'Narratives work to influence those invisible yet influential worlds of thoughts, feelings and attitudes. In this way, narrative becomes something of a lifeline, influencing what we believe and ultimately choose to act on.'

'THE COGNITIVE SCIENTIST'
Laura Ligouri



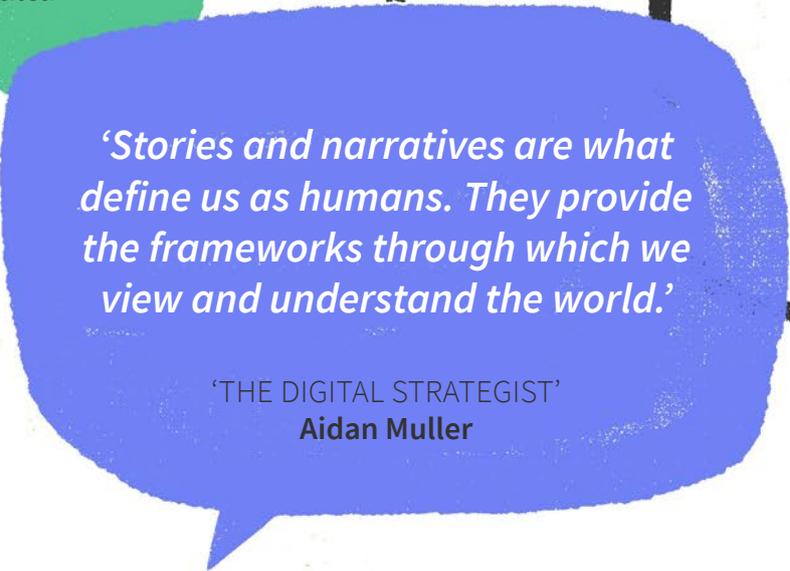
'I see narratives as the base-level of storytelling. It's fiction that is there to convince people to do something – whether that's a good or a bad thing, used altruistically or for the wrong reasons.'

'THE CULTURAL CATALYST'
Ravi Amaratunga Hitchcock



'Narratives are an interpretation of reality that serves the interests of the group that constructs them. And they can have a very direct impact on the action and behaviour of people.'

'THE CREATIVE ACTIVIST'
Elena Mejia Julca



'Stories and narratives are what define us as humans. They provide the frameworks through which we view and understand the world.'

'THE DIGITAL STRATEGIST'
Aidan Muller

the BLACK
Feminist
QUEER
Internationalist

—
Phumi Mtetwa

[Human rights]

Phumi works for Just Associates (JASS), a global women-led feminist and human rights network of activists, popular educators and scholars in 31 countries, helping women leaders to be more confident, organised, louder and safer.

‘Narratives are about invisible power: how perceptions, belief systems and ideology shape the way people define what is “right” and what is “wrong”.’

What do narratives mean to you?

I was born in a township 45 km west of Johannesburg. I grew up in the anti-apartheid movement, the women's movement, the LGBTI movement, the feminist movement, and really the global anti-capitalist movement.

We might not have called it narratives, but I've always been dealing with perceptions, myths and ideologies that are created to 'other' people.

I grew up in a context where perceptions about people were also used to define what is 'right' and 'wrong'. Who was accepted and who was marginalised.

In JASS, we work to understand the role of power in deepening the persecution of female human rights defenders and how narratives shape those power dynamics.

In this work, we convene women, feminists, intersex groups, unionists, and other movements to unpack how power is affecting their lives.

We engage in dialogues that are cross-movement, sector, and geography – where we create safe spaces for people to understand how power is manifested in different contexts.

This includes both formal power, which we call 'visible power', and hidden power, which we call 'invisible power'.

Invisible power

For us at JASS, narratives are about invisible power. How perceptions, belief systems and

ideology shape the way people define what is 'right' and what is 'wrong'.

The power to determine what is 'right' and what is 'wrong', is essentially the power to decide who lives and who dies. It's the power to determine who can access things, who cannot, and who's voice counts.

We see a lot of strategies that focus on visible power and how it operates: advocacy work, working through the courts, going to police stations, changing a bill, enacting a law and so on.

And yet the real power is often behind the scenes, behind closed doors, behind the president, behind the parliamentarian, behind the face of formal power.

That's where other actors, for example corporations or religious fundamentalists, influence what government defines as 'right' or 'wrong'.

What this means in practice is working with the movements we support to ensure that their strategies and tactics take into account how hidden and invisible power operate: the norms, beliefs, values and ideologies that underpin our understanding of ourselves in the world and that are influencing or controlling the policy agenda.

It's here that we need to do the most work to shift norms and values that underpin policy.

What dominant narratives do you encounter in southern Africa?

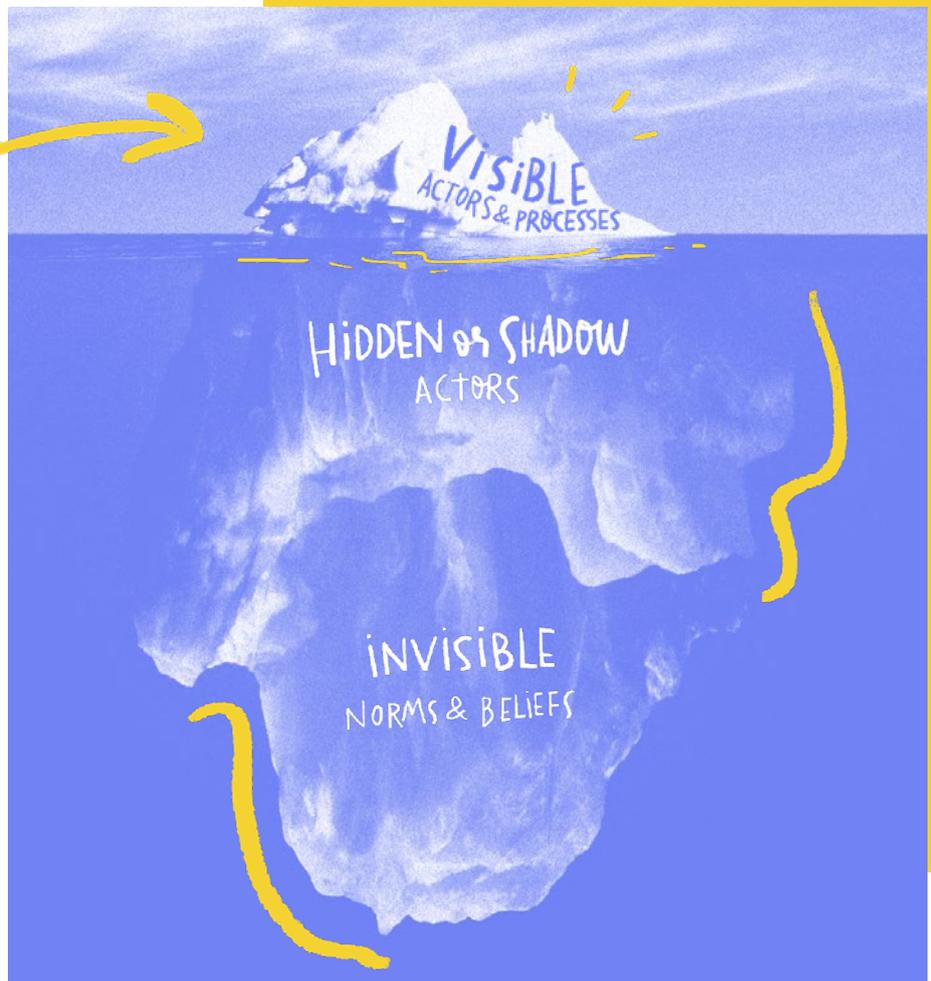
In Malawi, we've been working for ten years building a movement that is now 8,000 women strong.

[Visible: Setting rules]

[Hidden + Shadow]

[Invisible]

Internalised beliefs, norms, ideologies, public narratives, values, gender-race-class-sexuality, etc.



It's a movement of HIV positive women and the campaign is called Our Bodies Our Lives.

We saw again and again that these women were chased out of their villages by those holding formal power. *Chieftans* would say that it was not worth investing in them, because they were going to die.

Over time, as a group they have been redefining these narratives, refusing to hide and finding their power together. By existing, they are proving these narratives wrong.

We also worked with religious leaders, Christian and Muslim, to propose progressive interventions around HIV, like voluntary testing and counselling.

Changing perceptions is possible, but it takes time.

In South Africa right now, we are seeing the interests of mining companies, government and *Chieftans* connect, resulting in mining companies being given 200-year leases. Women are fighting to defend their land. But land is power, and in South Africa land is also life. And there is this underlying narrative or idea that a woman has no right to speak about land.

There are stories that seek to exclude women, telling them that their place is nowhere in the brokering of power, in determining livelihoods, nor in talking about land.

In 1996, women won rights in the South African Constitution. We won the legislature, our rights are on paper, but what is happening around the land issue shows you how power really operates. That's the contradiction in action.

Women have absolutely no place when the government talks to leaders. They are being persecuted because they disagree. They are under attack and have to go into hiding because they are fighting for the land rights of communities.

The narrative is stubborn and sticks. The wins in court don't matter. Women are being silenced and undermined in their communities.

In many countries across the continent, we see the religious Right pushing their anti-abortion, anti-LGBTI, anti-sex-work rhetoric, and governments are buying into it. That is causing people to die or to be stigmatised, marginalised and seen as second-class citizens, or worse, sub-human.

What can we learn from the movements you work with?

Communities have their own knowledge systems and means of culture production that are critical ways to put forward new narratives, claim space and challenge mainstream conservative narratives that are contributing to oppression and marginalisation.

We see how powerful it can be for movements to look at the world through a power lens. It enables them to think about the power players in relation to their own lives and struggles. This is important because we often do not understand how powerful groups invisibly undermine people's rights.

We see a great contradiction and tension between the Constitution we continue to uphold, and our inability to operate properly as a non-governmental organisation (NGO). In practice, this means human rights organisations' wings are clipped and they are less able to protect human rights.

When you place patriarchy, capitalism and militarisation in a power analysis framework, you see the bigger picture. It's important to understand how patriarchy, ideas of white supremacy, and capitalism are operating in practice.

We are in another cycle of renewal. It requires us as movements and activists to come up with new tactics and strategies to confront that intersection of power more effectively. Because the reality is that we are being killed by it.

The transformative potential of collective action

The power of movements and the transformative potential of collective power are also really important to understand. This work is about a collective approach and strategies for the common good – we can't do that alone or as individuals.

Collective power right now also means asking: who did we leave out before? Who was not part of informing the strategies when we won those rights the first time around? So that as we renew, we also think about how we elevate our voices and our collective power to ensure no one is left behind. ■

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the
COGNITIVE
SCIENTIST

—
Laura Ligouri

[Cognitive science]

Laura is a cognitive scientist, working on the boundary between neuroscience and psychology – between the brain and the mind. She is Executive Director and Founder of Mindbridge, a non-profit organisation that seeks to profoundly transform human rights through the action of psychological and neurological applied science.

‘We cannot make decisions and take action on something we have no experience with. So, if we want people to support and promote human rights, we need to start telling them what that looks like. If we only tell them what abuse of human rights looks like, that’s all they will know.’

Connecting neuroscience research with human rights work

My work skirts the boundary between neuroscience and psychology – understanding the boundary zone between the brain and the mind.

I look at how our biology gives rise to the mind. That invisible yet influential world of thoughts, feelings, attitudes, beliefs, imagination and also action – what you choose to do and why.

Mindbridge came from my experiences doing psych or neuro research, or supporting those doing research, and trying to engage with NGOs all over the world. The same themes kept coming up over and over again.

Human rights organisations have these larger than life questions: how do we mitigate the extraordinary bias and discrimination that leads to things like genocide? How do we develop empathy that's not going to fade over time the minute our intervention ends?

How do we build a sense of empowerment within a population that has been systematically disempowered over dozens of years?

These are topics that psychology and neuroscience researchers have been investigating for decades. And yet very rarely does that research ever make its way into human rights work.

At Mindbridge we were interested in connecting human rights defenders to all of that research taking place in the lab.

Narrative psychology

'Narrative psychology' is a psychology perspective interested in the storied nature of human conduct. In other words, how human beings make choices and deal with experiences by observing and listening to the stories that surround them.

As social creatures, we invest a lot of our cognitive energy in producing, receiving and being influenced by these stories.

They work to influence those invisible yet influential worlds of thoughts, feelings and attitudes. In this way, narrative becomes something of a lifeline, influencing what we believe and ultimately choose to act on.

When it comes to narrative, I seek to understand how the stories we weave, sometimes consciously but often unconsciously, influence our values and beliefs and specifically about human rights.

Why narratives are powerful

If we understand narratives as stories that inform how human beings see and engage with the world, there is a rather implicit nature to that powerful interaction.

And there's been tons written about this in both the psychological and neurobiological disciplines. Everything ranging from how we form our self-identity through stories, to how we make meaning from the events and people we are surrounded by.

It's possible to manipulate narratives to 'other' a particular group because it's easy... it's biological.



At Mindbridge, in our Implicit Bias Project, we use psychological and neurobiological research to design a mitigation programme for bias, racism and discrimination, by hacking our brains.

Bias is important to understand attacks on human rights defenders, activists, or specific groups in society, for example migrants.

What makes these kinds of attacks particularly salient are the ways in which they engage with an underlying biological system.

Bias is something that is present within our structures, society and cultures or institutions, but takes hold because of how our biology functions.

We have a line in our brains that separates 'us' from 'them'. But what that line looks like is the product of our culture, society, and our narrative experience.

At some point in our evolutionary history, it became advantageous for us to easily discern between us and them. It was something that was integrally entwined into our biology, it's something we do exceedingly fast.

It's precisely these kinds of deeply embedded processes that are being hacked and taken advantage of by populist leaders and those wanting to create divisions in society. They're playing with this knowledge in order to produce power and control.

Strategies for changing narratives

We need to understand these processes if we want to create effective methods of working against bias, racism, discrimination, homophobia, islamophobia, xenophobia. Then we have to foster community and cooperation instead.

The good news is that the research is there. We've just got to use it.

Implications of naming and shaming

When it comes to narratives around human rights, there's a big focus on reporting human rights abuses in an effort to motivate people to action and solidarity. What is known as 'naming and shaming'.

However, there is quite a bit of psychological research that indicates that we might inadvertently, through our own narrative design, be unconsciously weaving an understanding of human rights abuses as normal and ever present.

And for many populations, the idea of crisis and conflict as normal and ever present, without a shred of hope, is fertile ground for populist responses.

So, the question then becomes: how can narrative turn the tide? If our own use of narrative might be a big part of the problem, how can we change this process?

We don't necessarily want to stop monitoring and reporting human rights abuses... of course not. But in addition, we also need to start crafting a narrative that purposefully and intentionally offers a different reality.

Crafting stories of hope and possibilities

So, we need a different story for our brains and minds to create value and beliefs from. A story that tells people what human rights actually are. What a world with human rights looks like. We need to start crafting stories of hope and possibility.

This isn't a naïve notion. There is real psychological and neurobiological evidence suggesting that we cannot envision a future we have no memory of.

We cannot make decisions and take action on something we have no experience with. So, if we want people to support and promote human rights... we need to start telling them what that looks like. If we only tell them what abuse of human rights looks like, that's all they will know.

There's a lot of recent research around hope-based communications and the psychological or neurobiological realm,

but I'd like to bring us to one of the earliest stories, and that's a story of patient HM. HM is possibly one of the single best known patients in the history of neuroscience. Born in 1926, by the age of 27 he had experienced seizures for many years. In 1953 he underwent an experimental procedure: a bilateral medial temporal lobectomy. In other words, a significant portion of his brain was removed, including the hippocampus, which is essential for making memories. The seizures were reduced, but at a cost. A curious unforeseen side effect was that HM was unable to imagine and plan future events, suggesting that our memories and how new memories are formed are an essential element in imagining oneself engaging in future behaviour. Later research would support this claim.

We need our memories to envision future possibilities. We need our past experiences – real or simulated – to help us imagine the future.

Brain hack

Our brains are malleable. We have the ability to update these systems as we learn.

There is some beautiful research that shows that in some cases, simply shifting group boundaries can override what we might have thought of as deeply entrenched or even automatic biases (see for example, ['The Neural Substrates of In-Group Bias'](#) by Van Bavel et al. 2008).

By shifting our lens, we shift the way we interact with people. It's a bit of a brain hack... but it's possible. ■

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CHALLENGING NEGATIVE NARRATIVES AROUND CIVIC SPACE

*'One of the first steps civil society must take is to do its own narrative work. We need to think about **what is the story we want people to hear.** And then have a smart strategy for making people have the debates and conversations around these things.'*

'THE HOPE-BASED COMMUNICATOR'
Thomas Coombes



the Creative Activist

—
Elena Mejía Julca

[Social activism]

Elena is a young social movement leader from Peru. She's part of several activist collectives, including the leadership group of Foro Juvenil de Izquierda (Left Youth Forum), a youth collective on issues of inequality and human rights in Peru. She is one of the directors of Búho Teatro Hiphop, a young independent theatre company. Elena is a feminist, rapper, mobiliser and facilitator, involved in creating art, music and political proposals for change in Peru.

'You can pay a whole team of publicists to come up with a slogan, or you can give a few kids a spray can and some cardboard and boom, you have one that really connects with people.'

The importance of narratives in society

Narratives try to constitute 'truths'. They are an interpretation of reality that serves the interests of the group that constructs them. And they can have a very direct impact on the action and behaviour of people.

People receive narratives through media and communications: art, novels and so on. The narratives that build the public imagination of a country are in the hands of people who already have a lot of power. They are the ones who dominate in the production and distribution of narratives. They play a role in keeping things as they are.

Let me give you an example of a common narrative: poor people are poor because they want to be, they don't make an effort. How many people have become wealthy by their own effort alone? Very few. The large majority of the population struggles daily, has many virtues, but no wealth. This shows how important social security systems are in an individual's development, and how harmful narratives can be.

These narratives are repeated in direct and subliminal ways in the media, to the point that people believe it.

Narratives are a contested space – or at least it should be – for social movements and organisations that want to see change in the world.

Social movements must also have their own narratives if they want to contest power and shift dominant narratives that shape our societies. Narratives that speak truly and propose our vision for a different world.



How narratives are undermining social change in Peru

There are many narratives that characterise those involved in social movements and NGOs, like: 'they are all corrupt and get into this work to get a good salary and live off people's poverty', 'social movements have no technical knowledge, they're confused idealists', and 'the people that protest are violent and negative.'

These narratives are repeated in social circles, in social media, and all over the internet. We are letting ourselves be characterised by others – by people who have money and resources to do it in a compelling way.

Another really damaging narrative is that if you work in an NGO, a leftist political party, or something social, then you basically need to be a saint. You're not allowed to make any mistakes. If you mess up, you're incompetent, inconsequential, almost sub-human.

So, anyone on the right of the political spectrum can commit terrible crimes and no one says anything, because it's expected. But if progressive or left-leaning people commit an error, the moral penalty dished out by society is a million times worse.

These narratives hurt us and limit our potential for action in society.

At Foro Juvenil de Izquierda Elena runs a political school called From Protest to Proposal. In our conversation with Elena we asked her about the methodologies taught to analyse and co-construct new narratives.

The construction of a counter narrative, to me, is first to reveal the false narrative for what it is. For that you need evidence, analysis and debate.

It's not enough to tell people the facts or give them data. The formulation of knowledge and narratives comes from the process of building knowledge – arriving at joint conclusions based on joint analysis. From those conclusions you can begin to develop a counter, or new, narrative.

Changing narratives is just the first step to creating change

Sometimes, the journey to get to a new or counter narrative can feel incomplete. For example, you manage to shift the narrative that the poor are poor because they want to be. You say, 'that's a lie, the poor are poor because of structural inequalities, the system, corruption, state capture, and a million other reasons.' But at the end of the day, they are still poor.

The narrative is just the first step. Then you need a proposal for change. This is what

we want our school to do: to get people to go from protest to proposal.

The school is about creating spaces for political education and open debate. Where young people can learn together and question the different ways they experience inequality.

Another great space is the Labs for Young Activists: youth-led spaces where we work with other collectives to strengthen young people's activism across Peru.

Both of these initiatives are aimed at changing and creating narratives, giving people the necessary tools to take action and support broad political participation.

Examples of constructing a new narrative

Some of the bigger campaigns we have been involved in were able to produce new narratives, a stronger connection to the general public as well as policy change.

For example, around the *Ley Pulpin* in Peru. They said the law benefited young workers, but our analysis proved that this wasn't true. We showed that really they wanted young cheap workers.

When we took to the streets there were some amazing placards, people can be super creative making catchy slogans. Someone came up with 'Cholo, pero no barato'. Everyone understood this new narrative, there were more placards saying this and people started using the phrase. It unified the message and cut through the noise.

The 'Cholo pero no barato' framing has a lot of cultural baggage – a deep connection



to Peru's history. But those meanings are not static. A great thing about working with young people is you see them appropriating words.

When people are really living the issue, they take ownership of the creative process. It's their fight and that's where the impressive creativity flows. Young people can repurpose words really effectively. The whole Hiphop, cultural and counter-cultural movements are proof of that.

The power of art and theatre for constructing and challenging narratives is undeniable. [Búho Teatro Hiphop](#), our young independent theatre company, combines both these art forms to challenge narratives.

Critical thinking put in rhymes, rhythms and scenic pieces, keeping the 'knowledge in movement' essence of Hiphop. Our very first play 'Como Hombre' (Like a man), is a compelling and truthful piece of six men questioning their privileges over women, the roots of the violence they inflict and how they 'became a man' in this society.

By using grounded language, comedy and music, this alternative narrative has resonated with a big group of young activists. It has been performed for prisoners of the Castro High Security Facility and had a deep impact on that audience, sparking questions and conversations.

I've realised that what works best is when creatives drink directly from and are part of the movement. Publicists close themselves off in a room, they aren't aware of what's happening in the street. That's what we want

to avoid with this work. In other words, you can have a whole team of publicists working around the clock to develop a slogan, or you give a few kids a spray can and cardboard and boom, you get your slogan. But are these young people being recognised for this?

What civil society needs now

Social movements don't have the resources to take on those with the mass media narrative power. We need more spaces to question narratives in a conscious way.

Sometimes we're too focused on the product: the counter narrative or creative product. The process of analysing a narrative, creating a different narrative, building strategic communication pieces or a proposal for change is long.

Right now, what we need is to support longer and more sustainable processes. Yes, we need quantity, but we also need quality.

In our school, we try to make sure that each activist leaves not just with capability to produce content, but also to facilitate their own spaces.

'We don't do politics'

Another narrative is the need to depoliticise humanitarian and social work: 'we don't get involved in politics; we just try to help people.'

There's a narrative that only political candidates are political. To 'do' politics you need to have a public role. Politics of the masses doesn't exist, count or matter.

But for me, Hiphop has been one of the most political things that ever existed. When people say to me, 'by the way, we don't do politics' I think, 'what is it that you do then, if you aren't doing politics?' ■

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Ravi Amaratunga Hitchcock

[Marketing]

Ravi created and ran Pi Studios, the award-winning entertainment arm of the ad agency WE ARE PI in the Netherlands. He is now Co-Founder of Soursop, a 'cultural catalyst' helping brands, publishers and broadcasters communicate with audiences through emotional storytelling. He previously worked in TV (for Channel 4 in the UK) and digital publishing (VICE and Dazed) and has been making up myths for different audiences all of his career.

'A counter narrative is a reaction. If you're a myth-maker, and every great politician knows the power of that, you don't wait to see what someone else does first.'

What do narratives mean for the marketing industry?

I see narratives as the base-level of storytelling. It's fiction that is there to convince people to do something – whether that's a good or a bad thing, used altruistically or for the wrong reasons.

In other words, marketing is there to present the most convincing narrative to result in an action – usually buying a product.

So it can be quite sinister, but it's also mechanical. Most people in my industry are very aware of that power, and they are good at using it time and time again for clients.

An example of how brands use narratives

We worked with a beer brand that wanted to change its narrative. Their consumer's narrative was a beach brand, relaxed arbeque vibes. But another brand owned that space and they wanted to be distinct.

So, we created a new narrative, based on insights and opportunity. Festivals were becoming a massive thing with people partying even more. They could be a party beer – not just a beach beer.

Our strategy was to create a narrative that could be filled in by reality. It's perhaps a bit of a backwards way of working – you have the end before you define the means. It's not reality or fact based, rather an emotional resonance, where individuals can see their role in it.

It's not like people were going out and saying they wanted the brand, but we thought we could own that space. It's inventing your own narrative in a place where one doesn't exist!

Using narratives to change or manipulate values and perceptions

People have short memories. Throughout history you can see temporary values that are completely manipulated. Marketing and advertising are fantastic at reframing a word or a value to have a different meaning.

Acting as a catalyst to change the meaning of things is what marketers do. At best that's challenging a perception that should have been challenged a long time ago, at worst its devaluing something that is really useful to society.

How to understand existing perceptions

We have deep dive strategies, do deep consumer research, and social listening – different tools to hear about what's being said on major social media platforms.

Basically, you get a data set to understand how your brand or product is perceived. If you find something good, you can leverage it. If you find nothing good, then you can try something new.

Take the beer brand example. That's how we found out that people didn't see a difference with the other brand. They mentioned them in the same sentences, got them mixed up. It was clear our task was to distinguish the two.

Why is collaboration across sectors necessary?

Our working lives are based around us carving out niches within our various sectors. We develop narratives for our audiences with a specific remit, hardly ever taking a broader view beyond the borders of our specific industries.



These are shots from a short film called 'Kids of the Bims,' exploring music culture in the most ethnically diverse neighbourhood in Amsterdam. We co-produced the film, working alongside broadcasting platform Boiler Room and Amsterdam-based venue Melkweg.

If civil society exists in the current universe it is going to keep losing. The rules are stacked against you. How do you really break free of them? With a new narrative?

In that instance it might be really great to have with you an actual writer – someone who constructs stories or scripts and who can look for basic narrative devices in the challenges you face.

Give them the building blocks of the issue or brand you are trying to reframe, and they will structure the story with engaging plot pointers. Again, it's this idea of inventing narratives. If it doesn't exist, you make it exist. Even if it isn't real. This is the scary part of our times.

Are too many NGOs dividing the narrative?

That's about organisation.

Take Mandela and the South African apartheid. Mandela created a narrative that everyone could get behind. And it was sellable to an international audience.

Whether Mandela knew he was doing it or not, he sold a vision (actually he did know because he had to convince key international politicians of his cause). In the US it was about civil rights, in the UK it was about post-colonial unity and the commonwealth. He had many narratives for many people. But in South Africa he had one narrative: we are going to create a new South Africa together.

This isn't about counter narratives or countering the forces against you. It's about changing the rules and conversation completely so that everyone can be a part of it.

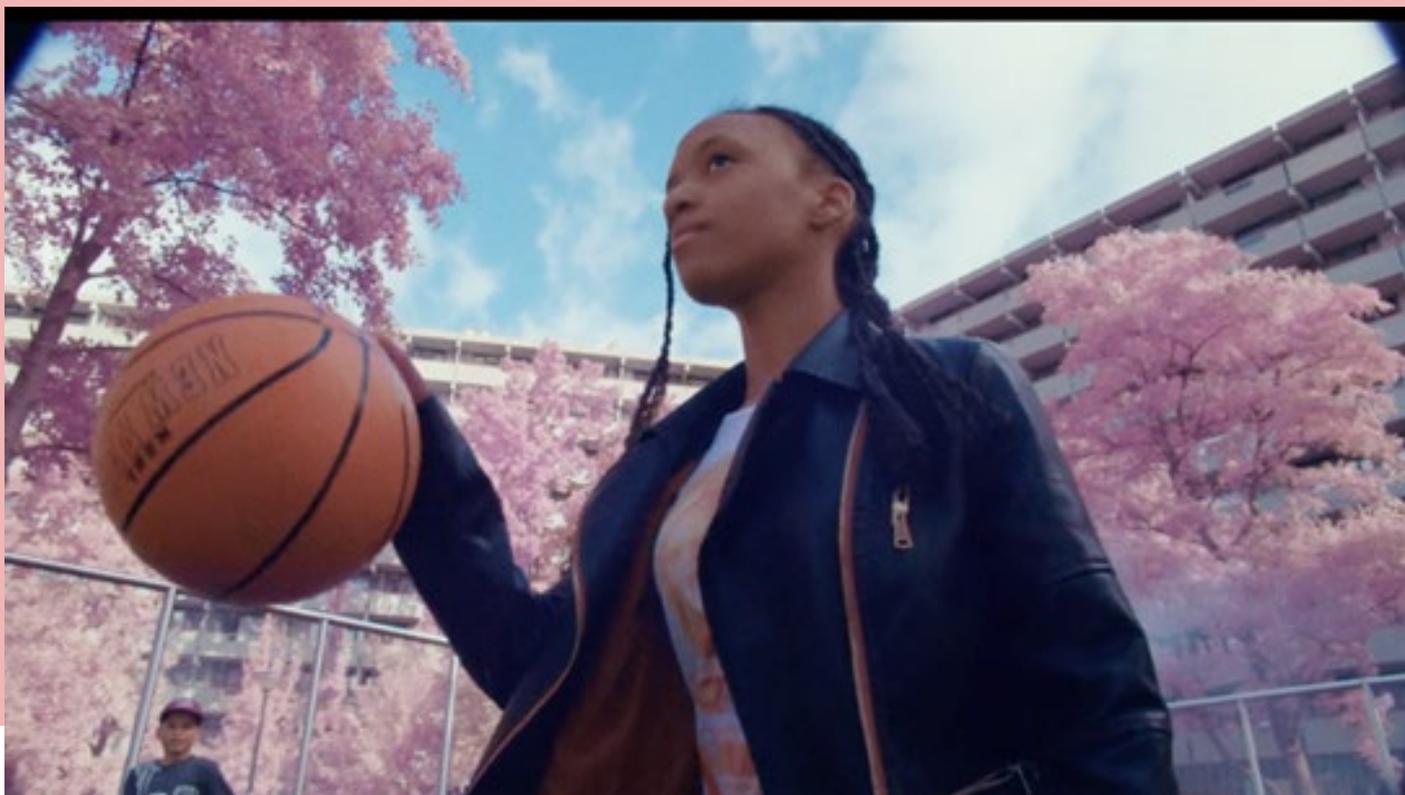
Yet to know that our work has a common thread that has implications far beyond our direct line of sight could be revolutionary.

For an activist to know they can use the techniques of a scriptwriter, for a marketer to understand their toolkit could be useful to grassroots organisations, opens a whole new world of possibilities. A world of cross pollination and unlikely lateral connections. And this is where true innovation happens.

In our conversation with Ravi, we started talking about the challenges facing the NGO and civil society sector.

New versus counter narratives

A counter narrative is a reaction, a response. If you're a myth-maker, and every great politician knows the power of that, you don't wait to see what someone else does first.



Other insights for civil society

Honesty is a new trend

One thing that's a bit of a trend right now, and that's been working well for a couple of brands, is 'breaking the fourth wall' of advertising: being honest with the customer. 'Hey we know we've not been very environmentally friendly and we don't have all the answers right now, but we're on a journey and we'd like you to be on that journey with us.' Is there a way for civil society organisations with volatile public relations to 'break the fourth wall'?

Each generation changes the myths they are told

The other thing to remember is that no narrative is constant. Each generation changes the myths they are told. Mandela's myth has now been challenged. Once you create a narrative you need to keep it strong to survive. Or accept that it will change.

The film 'Kids of the Bims' celebrates the neighbourhood's creativity and unique sounds. The short film was part of ADE's music film programme and the full documentary will launch in 2020. [Watch the trailer.](#)

Bring in fresh thinking

You also sometimes need a complete outsider's perspective to tell you something you can't see yourself. We look at ourselves in a particular way, defined by the narratives we tell ourselves. That's why brands will hire an agency, because they need external perspectives. Civil society may also want to look to external creative agencies and writers more.

A simple message effects change

World leaders are like your users scrolling through their Instagram feed. They don't have time for complicated messages. You need something simple, easy to affect, that makes you want to engage. ■

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CHALLENGING NEGATIVE NARRATIVES AROUND CIVIC SPACE

*'Collective power right now
also means taking a look
at who did we leave out
before? Who was not part
of informing the strategies
when we won those rights
the first time around? So
that as we renew, we also
think about how we elevate
our voices and our collective
power to ensure no one
is left behind.'*

'THE BLACK FEMINIST
QUEER INTERNATIONALIST'
Phumi Mtetwa



Aidan Muller

[Policy
communications]

Aidan is a journalist-turned-strategic communications and digital expert, majoring in political affairs. He has been a digital advisor in UK Government, including helping introduce social media to the Prime Minister's Office at Number 10. He now leads Digital Strategy at Cast From Clay, a London-based communications agency founded in response to growing polarisation and the rise of political extremes.

'We're not saying sacrifice facts at the expense of narratives, there's no reason why they should be mutually exclusive.'

What are narratives to you?

Stories and narratives are what define us as humans. They provide the frameworks through which we view and understand the world.

There's a great book by journalist Christopher Booker called *The Seven Basic Plots*. It identifies the seven narrative arcs in the history of human storytelling. Pretty much every major piece of literature, from *The Iliad* to *The Lord of the Rings*, fits within those narrative arcs.

The narrative arcs are storylines that we recognise and can identify with. They activate pre-existing neural networks in our brain that make us positively predisposed towards the stories we are being told.

That's what narrative is, it's a framework populated by stories. And the stories are the proof points of a certain narrative.

Some of the best stories weave multiple plot points together. So, it's really powerful if you can tap into a number of plots and narratives that our brains are naturally predisposed towards.

The role of emotion

Those plots or narratives are devices that can help elicit emotion within whichever audience you're trying to communicate to.

I am always careful about how I talk about emotion because it sends anyone who works in policy running.

But emotion doesn't necessary mean bleeding hearts or a crying baby. Emotion is evoking something deeply human in your target audience. Anything that makes people relate to the story you are trying to tell and that creates empathy.

An interesting finding from our research was on the role of emotion in forming political opinions. Not only does emotion play an important role in how the majority of the population forms their political views, but that's also true of policymakers.

We asked those working in policy and politics to what extent their heart rules over their mind in forming political views and 48 % said that it did.

So, think tanks and policy organisations need to think more about the role of narratives, framing and human storytelling. If they don't do it for the public, then at the very least they should be doing it for policymakers.

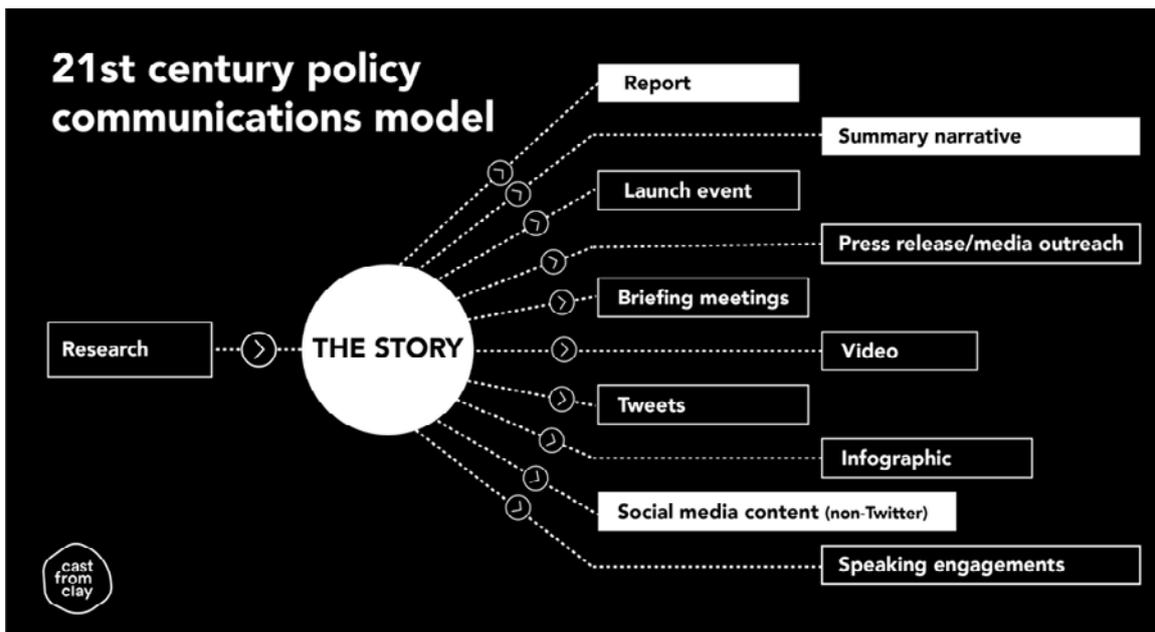
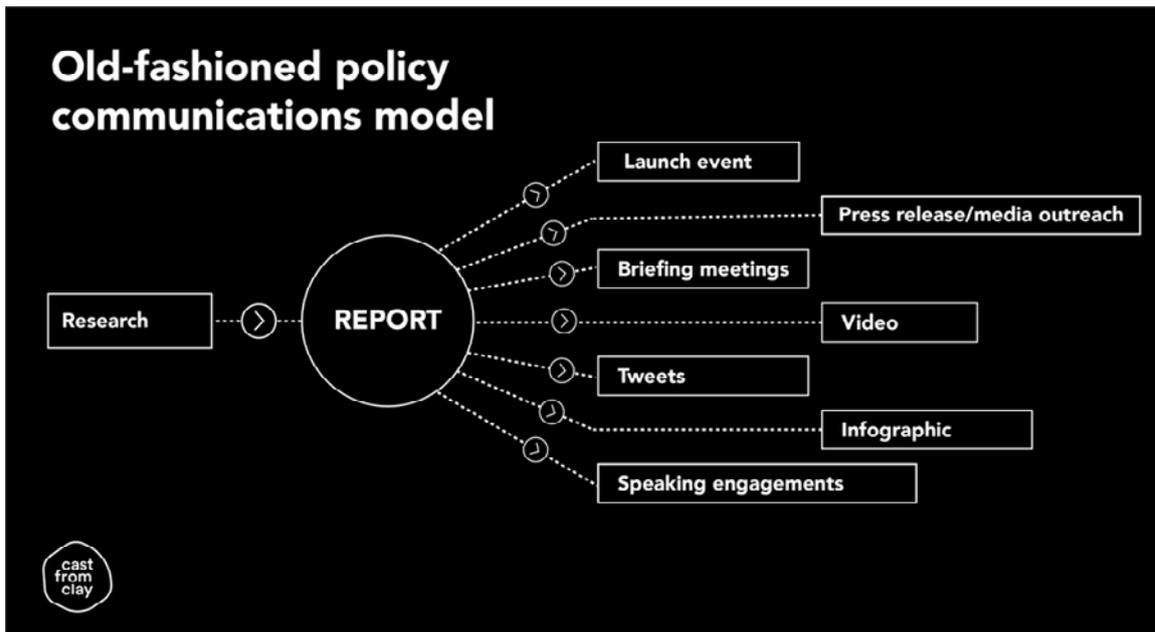
Cast From Clay works with international NGOs, think tanks and universities to connect them with the public – to craft policy ideas into human shaped stories. In our conversation with Aidan, we asked him to tell us more about why this is important?

We are trying to get thinktankers and policy experts to think in terms of stories and narratives, because for years they have relied upon fact-based communication strategies – which don't work.

We want think tanks to not just focus on a particular piece of policy, but to think about the broader framework within which they are telling their story.

You can have the best argued policy, with the best facts and evidence, but in the end it's the best story that wins.

For example, in the UK European Union Referendum, the Remain campaign made

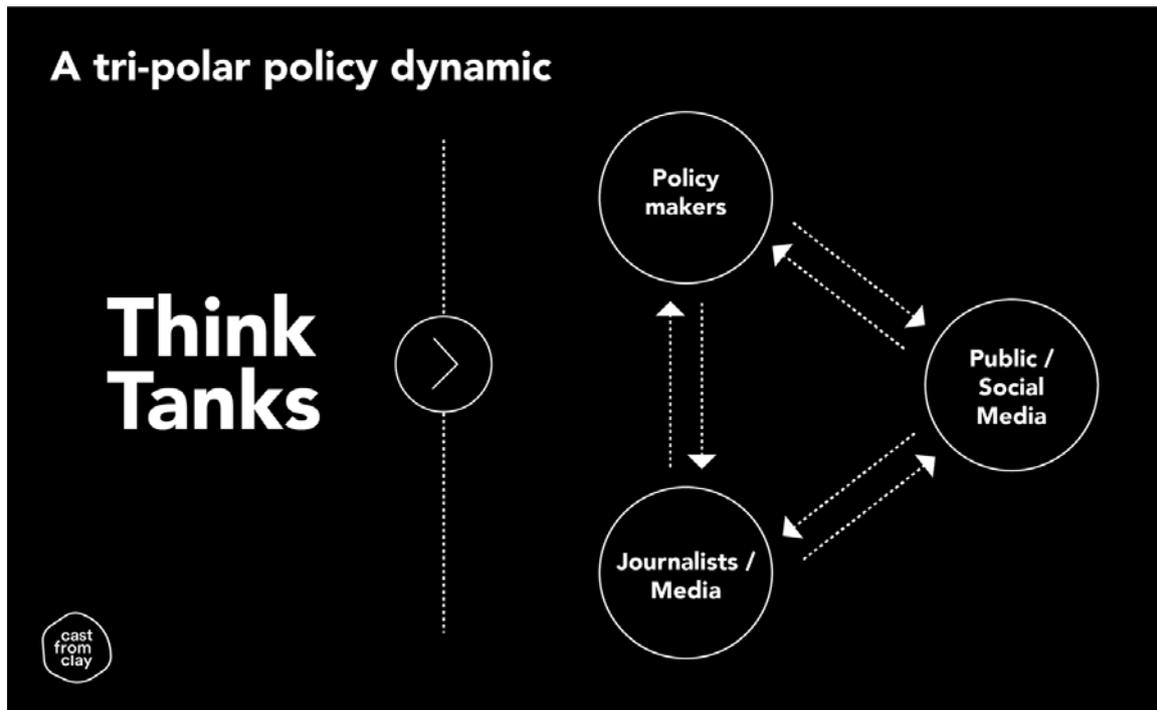


a rational fact-based appeal. Whereas the Leave campaign told a story about plucky citizens rallying against an urban liberal elite and Brussels technocrats.

They provided a happily ever after scenario: 'we will leave the EU and things will be better.'

Whereas the Remain campaign's happily ever after was the status quo, and that's not what dreams are made of.

To policy experts we're not saying sacrifice facts at the expense of narratives, there's no reason why they should be mutually



exclusive. We're saying, you're really good at facts, but let's get better at narratives. Because, things have changed quite radically in the last 15 years. Previously the policy agenda was set by the policymakers and the media.

Today, if you want policy to change the reality is that you need public support, or at the very least you need the public to not be against it. The public outcry in the UK around the Dementia TAX policy which led to it being dropped is an example.

Pre-internet, facts were in short supply. Think tanks had the monopoly on facts, so they had a position of authority.

They don't have this anymore and they need to adjust. In this way, the civic space for think tanks has changed quite radically.

Today, for every argument you want to make, you can go online and retro fit the facts

to support your narrative. You can find a blog or obscure research that will back up the argument you're predisposed to.

The disconnect between politics and the people

I think that anti-expert and anti-establishment narratives are symptoms of the same phenomenon: we've been so focused on the macro side of politics and economics that we have completely missed the micro side: the reality on the ground for people.

It's all very well telling the general public that GDP is growing or unemployment has never been lower, but if they feel they are worse off, they aren't going to care about what the statistics say.

Thinktankers aren't adequately representing their constituency. They would probably say

the general public aren't their constituency. But the general public gives them legitimacy in the democratic system.

So if the general public feel that think tanks and policy groups don't represent them, of course they are going to think that policies are made in the interests of that urban elite.

That's what is contributing to the rise of populism and distrust of experts. If your narrative as an expert doesn't fit the public's lived experience, then at some point you are going to lose the battle.

Keeping the door open for dialogue

It's useful to recognise that for the most part people want the best for their family, community, country. So often, when they oppose your views they are doing it in good faith.

That's why it's so important to understand both your supporters and those who oppose you.

And I don't mean paying lip service to that idea, but really fundamentally accepting that their priorities or what they value might be different to yours, but that doesn't mean that they're wrong.

Respecting that they are coming from a different place but also trying to bring them along with you by changing the course of their narrative.

Build bridges for people

Pretty much all the research points to the fact that the best way to build bridges with people is keeping the door open for dialogue. And as polarisation grows this becomes more and more important.

It needs to be about redefining narratives, changing their course. If you take an adversarial approach and try to obliterate a framework within which people see themselves and understand the world, well that's going to receive a lot of push back – or straight-out rejection.

This is important for think tanks, people working in policy, working in NGOs, to think about. Part of our message is: *take the public as they are, not as you wish them to be.*

We can try to steer them in a certain direction but they are who they are. If they gravitate towards a populist feeling, away from experts, we need to look at ourselves in the mirror and ask how did we get here? We need to take responsibility for this and change the way we do things.

That's part of what we advocate for at Cast From Clay. We try to tell stories that help bridge the gap between the policy 'elite' and the general public.

But also, with our research, build a better understanding of where the general public are coming from and what their frameworks are, so that we can at least be having the same conversation. ■

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the FASHION revolutionist

Sarah Ditty

Sarah is Global Policy Director at Fashion Revolution, a global movement campaigning for a fashion industry that conserves and restores the environment and values people over growth and profit. Sarah has worked in social responsibility and environmental sustainability in the fashion sector for the past ten years and was recently named one of London's most influential people by the Evening Standard Progress 1000.

[Ethical fashion]

'If we wanted people to take action and care about these issues, we needed to use all that knowledge about what makes people excited about fashion – the language, visuals, influencers.'

The first issue of Fashion Revolution's fanzine, called 'Fashion, Power, Money' explored the hidden stories behind your clothing. [Read the fanzine.](#)

What is Fashion Revolution?

Fashion Revolution was founded as a direct response to the 2013 Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh. It killed over 1,100 people, mostly young women making clothes for big high-street brands.

Workers had sounded the alarm a few days before, saying there were cracks in the wall and they didn't feel safe. They were forced to go to work and perished because of the exploitative way the fashion supply chain is structured.

So, a group of about 20 diverse people working in different sectors – including environmental sustainability, human rights, social issues, the fashion sector, and corporate social responsibility – came together to do something.

Rana Plaza was the largest industrial accident since 1984. We wanted to make sure that it became a watershed moment, not just another story in a news cycle that would be forgotten in a week.

We wanted to use it to build momentum to create systemic and much more radical change within the fashion sector – to mobilise a more mainstream audience.

Supply chains are so opaque, fragmented and complex. Rana Plaza was a case in point. A lot of brands didn't even know where their clothes were being made or under what conditions. There was no traceability and so no accountability.

We set out to create a new narrative around the need for greater transparency in the fashion supply chain that would resonate with more people than NGOs and campaign efforts before us had managed.

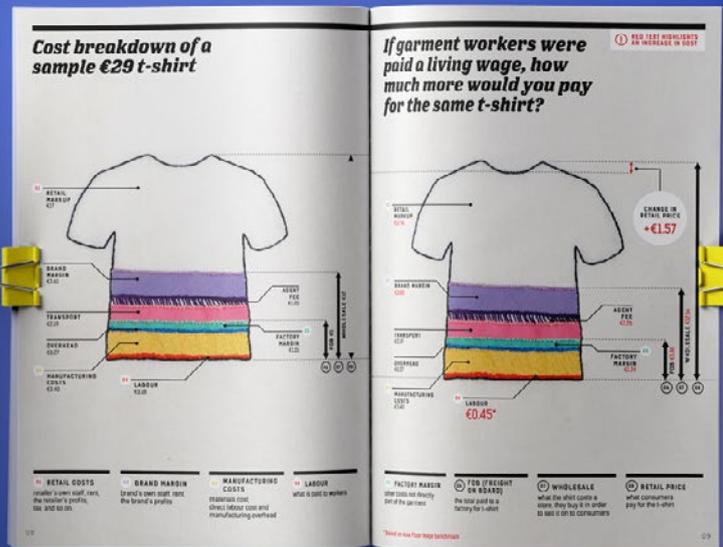


Using fashion branding and marketing techniques

Most of the people that started Fashion Revolution had worked in fashion for a long time, so they understood not just how the fashion industry worked, but also had experience working with brands and understood the power of marketing. That's the knowledge we brought to the table as a collective.

They understood why people buy and love fashion, and how to speak about fashion in a way that's relevant, enticing and interesting to people.

If we wanted people to take action and care about these issues, we needed to use all that knowledge about what makes people excited about fashion – the language, the visuals, the influencers. We needed to use storytelling in a way that other campaigners had not yet done at scale.



That brand value is literally what drives the fashion industry and fashion consumption. That's why people are willing to pay so much money for big name brands.

We needed to use those same tactics and principles to drive people in a different direction: not just to think about if the brand is cool or looks good, but the supply chain and all the stories behind it.

First and foremost, that required having a strong brand ourselves, where fashion consumers would be like 'oh that looks cool' before they even know what we are about.

We picked a name that said what we do, or what we aim for: Fashion Revolution was simple, easy to grasp, bold, and action oriented.

Using digital campaigns to cut through the noise

One of our strongest tools for activating people has been social media. We asked

ourselves: where is the fashion audience? How do we reach them? For the past ten years they've been hanging out online, sharing content and talking about the latest shows, models, trends etc.

We focused on driving online conversations around where our clothes come from, the lack of transparency, how we just have no idea what we're buying or what we're supporting with our hard-earned money.

If you're going to have online conversations, you have to have a tool to track those conversations: hashtags.

Our first hashtag corresponded with our first-year campaign called #insideout. It was around the time of the ice bucket challenge that was sweeping the internet and raised the most money ever for the motor neurone disease ALS.

We wondered what could be fashion's version of this. We asked people to turn their clothes inside out so their label was showing, to tag



a brand, ask them for more information and then challenge a friend.

Labels give you so little information about the supply chain. So, that was our way of getting people to question what they knew about their clothes from the label.

Then came #whomademyclothes? By asking a question through a hashtag you involve people in trying to answer it.

The action for that year was to connect with your favourite brands and ask 'who made my clothes?' to try to get them to be more transparent about where their clothes are made.

We have continued that campaign since 2014 and every year it grows. There are hundreds of thousands of people contacting brands asking them that question.

Each year, we publish the Fashion Transparency Index, ranking the world's biggest brands and retailers. People can

look at the data and know which brands are further ahead on particular issues.

They can then ask more sophisticated questions, like 'what are you doing on living wages?' or 'what are you doing on freedom of association?' That means brands have to look to their supply chain to get those answers.

It's a great way to start connecting dots that weren't connected before and build conversations on issues that weren't being had before, at least not with the mainstream public.

Who holds the narrative power in fashion?

Brands hold the power because they have the money and marketing expertise. And good marketing entails creating narratives about what is cool, desirable, sexy.

We have been trying to use brands' own techniques to disrupt and change the narrative.

We have to tell a new story about what our clothes mean. We're trying to make it more than just brand value or aesthetics. We want it to be about the stories of the people involved in the processes that led to the garment being constructed and you being able to buy it and wear it.

We didn't call this narrative change in the beginning. But we wanted to know how to change the culture around fashion – the story, the values, brand and consumer behaviour. Only more recently we have come to understand that it's about narrative change.

Lessons on mobilising people

A way in to talk about bigger issues

Fashion and clothing can be a useful tool to get people thinking about much bigger issues, like capitalism, political economy, or politics. Because it can be fun and a bit frivolous or glamorous, it's not scary for people to engage in systemic, political and economic conversations.

Fashion is such a driver of other cultural trends too. If we can make change in fashion, we can make change in so many other arenas. It's been really interesting to see how fashion can influence that bigger conversation about the way our economy is designed.

Knowing your audience

Knowing the people you want to activate or connect with is hugely important: who they are, what they care about, where they hang out, where they connect, what visuals they like, what language they respond to.

Humour

A lot of the content we make goes viral because it's funny. Memes really drive conversations. Not being too preachy, rather using satire and humour to get people to think differently in their own way.

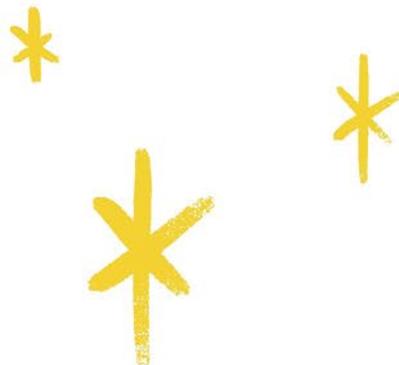
Asking questions and being provocative

People are like, 'hmmm, I haven't really thought about it before.'

Most people don't like to be told what to do or what to believe. But when you design messages, content, visuals in a way that prods and pokes them into questioning something, that is super powerful because then they come to it on their own.

Using the power of brands.

If you are trying to build a community or a movement then you need a brand that people can get behind. You want them to wear it like a badge or an identity, so they can find each other and feel like they are under the same umbrella. A brand that speaks to what you're about and what you are trying to achieve. ■



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CHALLENGING NEGATIVE NARRATIVES AROUND CIVIC SPACE

*‘Social movements
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Right now, what we need is
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Yes, we need quantity,
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‘THE CREATIVE ACTIVIST’
Elena Mejía Julca



the Frame WORKERS

Nat Kendall Taylor & Nicky Hawkins

Nat is a psychological anthropologist and CEO of the FrameWorks Institute in the US, and Nicky is an experienced campaigner and Director of Impact at the FrameWorks Institute in the UK. The FrameWorks Institute helps non-profit organisations frame public discourse on social and scientific issues. Its Strategic Frame Analysis approach offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid.

[Framing]

‘Do you want to get to where you want to get to, or do you want to keep getting stuck in a story that isn’t allowing you to be heard or understood?’

Why framing matters

[Nat]: Understanding is frame dependent. Understanding of information is contingent on the way it is presented to people. So the decisions made about how to present information, that's how I define framing.

It's the choices that a communicator makes – consciously or unconsciously. And how those choices have perception and behavioural effects on the people receiving the information.

People who are communicating about complex social issues have to realise that they are not their audience. Communication is not a literal process of translation. You can't just think that the things that work for you or get you going as an advocate will for people who aren't you.

Then there's the strategic piece. Even when organisations realise that they have to change public thinking to shift policy, each organisation is telling their own story and everyone's story is different. That's no way to change public thinking. It's a cacophony.

Alignment and collective action

So a lot of this work is also about finding the frames that work, but also strategically aligning around them, sharing and amplifying them.

This requires a really different way of thinking about communications: not branding or competitive activity, but one that is collaborative and requires people to actually share messages.

If you are interested in social change, you are interested in culture change. And the only way to change culture is all together, not all apart.

[Nicky]: You can present really good evidence around the need to shift frames and establish a new narrative, and people are absolutely bought into it and up for it. But then it's difficult to do things differently across an organisation and an entire sector. Old habits die hard so this aspect of the work requires lots of energy and support.

In our conversation with Nat and Nicky, we asked them to walk us through how they support organisations to develop framing strategies.

[Nat]: The first question is always: what is the story you want to tell?

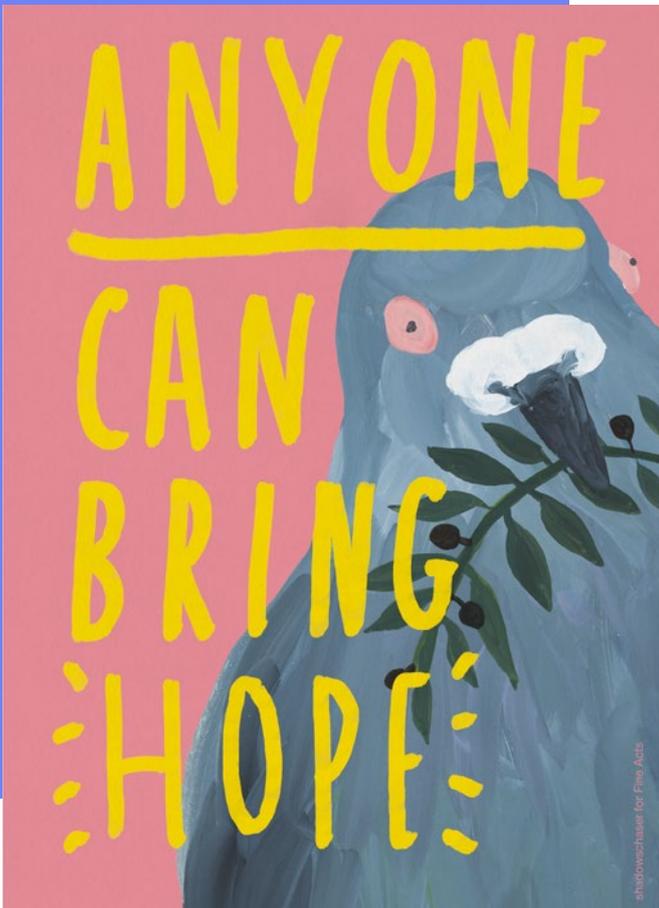
A lot of narrative and communications work starts without having worked out what it is you want it to do. Nothing can be successful unless you start with a clear understanding of what you want to happen. What are the ideas you want to communicate, what are the changes in policy you want to see?

The next question is: what are the stories people are telling themselves?

When you engage people on concepts, they are not blank slates. They have embedded understandings from years of experiences. A lot of this is based in a common culture and exposure to media. So, what can you say about the common ways that people make sense of an issue?

The third question is: what are the stories being told?

This question is answered largely through the use of content analysis. The stories that are being perpetuated by news media,



non-news media, and by the sector itself. When you look at advocacy communications, what are the most prominent groups saying? What messages are they disseminating? What frames are embedded in those messages?

The fourth question is: what is the story you should be telling?

What ideas do you want to communicate? How do you want people to receive them? What are the most effective values and the best ways of organising them? What are the best examples to use? What is the story that gets people moving the direction you want to take them?

Then the fifth question is: what is the best way to get those stories out?

This is where we take a backseat role as advisors and let others who are great at this work step up and do their thing.

Over the last 15-years, we've developed a process for empirically answering each of those questions, using social science methods from a really wide range of disciplines.

This is also all we think about every day! We've asked those questions on 50 projects a year for 15 years.

[Nicky]: I take a pragmatic approach to all of this. It's about getting the job done. Everyone is communicating all the time. We're all constantly making choices about how we communicate.

We can make those choices about how we present information based on good evidence. But the big question is: do you want to get to where you want to go, or do you want to keep getting stuck in a story that isn't allowing you to be heard or understood?

Operationalising frames

[Nicky]: I'm a fan of early adopters. So, when we have a piece of research with framing recommendations, before we even publish the research, we operationalise it and get it into discourse as quickly as possible.

To give you an example, we were doing some work on child health and obesity in the UK. It's a topic steeped in stigma and judgement. It's very othering and fatalistic.

We have been working with a group of organisations, doing research to understand public thinking and explore frames that might shift public thinking.

Now we have finished the research, we are thinking about how we shape what we have to recommend into a published piece of guidance.

But at the same time, we are operationalising those frames with high-profile spokespeople who are in the position to get them out there.

Challenges to changing how NGOs communicate

The big challenge is the extent to which this is seen as a priority. The extent to which people are willing to put the time and the resources into going on a journey to do it better.

If communications are forever seen as an afterthought – as the spin or polish after the real work is done – then nothing will change.

If you see communications as fundamental to our ability to drive change, then you start to realise we need to invest and prioritise accordingly.

Challenges in framing around civic space

The breadth of what you are trying to scoop up in the term civic space makes it a challenge. When you're going out with a message that it's about *everything*, it's easy for people to hear *nothing*. There isn't much to grab hold of.

So, the biggest challenge you have is telling people what it is really about and why

it matters. Why does it matter to people with busy lives who don't already know or think about this stuff in the way you do?

A good example was Brexit in the UK. The Leave campaign told a simple story about freedom and control. The Remain campaign was that it was about everything: money, trade, international cooperation, staying and reforming. They had a plethora of reasons why remaining in the European Union was important.

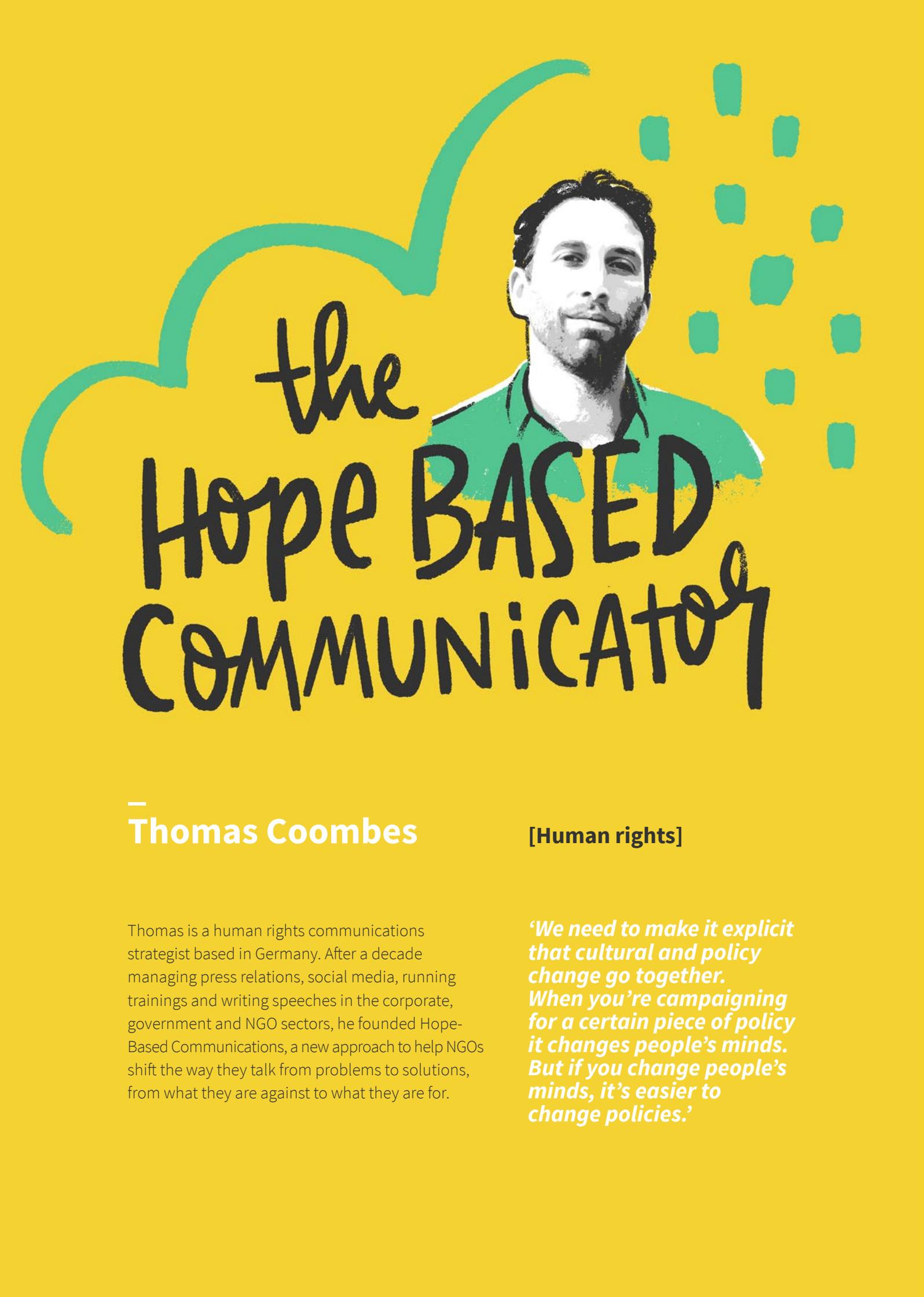
This has broader significance in our research and work: you can't say everything. You have to focus your frame so people can hear one or two things, rather than the long list.

I think the NGO community often falls into the trap of trying to say everything, and ends up saying nothing.

You have to know what the narrative is you want to change from and to. You have to know the current narratives on an issue, then you have to know the narrative you want to move towards. All this requires work.

In an ideal world, you have donors who are committed to supporting this work and that realise that it's not a six-month campaign. It is an on-going piece of social movement work. ■

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the
HOPE BASED
COMMUNICATOR

—
Thomas Coombes

[Human rights]

Thomas is a human rights communications strategist based in Germany. After a decade managing press relations, social media, running trainings and writing speeches in the corporate, government and NGO sectors, he founded Hope-Based Communications, a new approach to help NGOs shift the way they talk from problems to solutions, from what they are against to what they are for.

'We need to make it explicit that cultural and policy change go together. When you're campaigning for a certain piece of policy it changes people's minds. But if you change people's minds, it's easier to change policies.'

The power of narrative

When I was working at Amnesty, I was troubled by the rise of populism and that concepts like human rights weren't resonating with people. But then you would hear someone from Black Lives Matter say 'this isn't about politics, it's about human rights.' So, to me, the concept still had value.

Narrative is powerful because if research shows us that concepts like human rights and civil society don't resonate with people, we can change the associations people have with those words.

I spent most of my career trying to get media coverage and awareness on these issues. But I realised that I was always using frames and narratives of opposition.

Human rights should be something people feel excited and passionate about. But there's still a lot of unanswered questions about what we *actually* want the human rights narrative to be about.

When you speak to people in civil society, they say they want people to think of it as community – people coming together to change something.

But civil society as community isn't the story we're telling. We're telling the story of a brave, but small, number of activists that have been cracked down upon.

Social listening tells us that conversations using the words civil society and civic space predominately have an emotional tone of despair, disgust or conflict. It's always about civil society fighting, rather than community or bringing people together.



One of the first steps civil society must take is to do its own narrative work: think about what story we want people to hear, what we stand for. And then have a smart strategy for getting debates and conversations going around these ideas.

Working with values

Civil society works on a lot of different issues, but rarely on values. Yet values really matter.

Most NGOs work with similar values and visions for society; if I ask people working in human rights to draw their vision for a world with human rights, they tend to draw a landscape that's remarkably similar to what environmentalists draw.

These organisations could come together to create that shared worldview and values that could be the basis of a narrative we can all get behind and promote.

Ultimately, if you don't define your identity, somebody else will. And then you've lost control of the story.

Policy versus cultural change

I've seen a lot of campaigns calling for policy change. For example, to implement the Istanbul Convention to outlaw domestic violence.

But that doesn't change the cultural practices. Campaigners will then say it's about policy implementation and call for more measures.

It's like we're incapable of seeing the cultural element and just keep calling for more policies, even though we know what's needed is an attitude change campaign.

TO HOPE IS TO EMBRACE UNCERTAINTY



I've attended workshops where people have said 'really we need to change men's attitudes, but we can't do that, that's a cultural thing, so let's focus on an awareness raising campaign for young girls.' That's important too, but we're afraid to try to create social change.

We need to make it explicit that cultural and policy change go together. When you're campaigning for a certain piece of policy it changes people's minds. But if you're changing people's minds, it's easier to change policies.

Our current skill set is focussed on laws and policies. To change culture feels like too big of an unknown.

Working on campaigns I've noticed people tend to focus on the problem, not the solution. They say 'what if our solution doesn't work?'

Our credibility comes from having moral high-ground and facts.' So, there's a lot of fear of the unknown.

New versus counter narratives

We talk a lot about civil society being threatened, defenders under attack, shrinking civic space. Even the word defender is so... defensive. No one's favourite player is a defender, it's the goal scorer, the one who gets things done!

Our current approach is to call out and say what we don't want to see.

Neuroscience research shows that in doing so, you confirm the thing you want to reject as the new normal. So our approach cannot be counter narratives, it has to be new narratives.



It comes back to the question: what are we trying to achieve? What kind of change do we want to see and what work will actually promote it?

And we're not only *not talking* about the things we want to see, we're also *not doing* them ourselves.

In our conversation, we asked Thomas about his work with JustLabs Narrative Laboratory and his publication *Be the narrative: How changing the narrative could revolutionize what it means to do human rights.*

The focus on 'being the narrative' is inspired by Barack Obama. When coming up with his campaign slogan he said 'what you do is the message.'

So if you want civil society groups to be seen as 'community' and 'grassroots', they actually need to be community and grassroots.

What is a world with more human rights and fairness? In practical terms, it is people caring for each other, more kindness, more empathy.

You realise, these are our goals and policies are a way to achieve that. Then should the activities we do be about spreading empathy? If we organise an angry protest, that might actually reduce empathy. It projects a vision of society in conflict.

A lot of us don't believe the vision we are working towards is actually possible. Which means we work from our opponent's worldview: humans aren't great and we need laws to manage the worst of them. As opposed to a humanity worldview: human nature is fundamentally about caring for each other and we need human rights and civil society to bring the best out of people.

Research shows that the more people think with the humanity worldview, the more likely they are to get involved in civic activism. The more people think with the inhumanity worldview, the less likely they are.

A hope-based communications shift

I developed five hope-based communication shifts so people could go on a journey to discover the changes they require. Everyone has the answers within themselves.

I want people to ask: what's the biggest picture thing we want to achieve? What's the solution? What's the behaviour we want to see? Anat Shenker Osorio said it perfectly: 'It's not about saying what's popular, it's about making popular what needs to be said.'

The five shifts take you from fear to hope. From talking about the problem to how the solution will work. From showing what values or behaviours we're against, to celebrating what we're for and encouraging people to do it more.

Instead of threats, or trying to guilt or make people act through fear or urgency, give them opportunities to be part of change, and belong to something.

Instead of showing our story characters as victims, show them as everyday heroes, and bring out their humanity.

An example of hope-based narrative change

In New Zealand, after the Christchurch attacks, civil society's starting point was 'we are against hate'.

Then they asked themselves:
if we're against hate, what are we *for*?

They came up with the messages of hope campaign. They asked people across the world to send messages of hope to support the community that had been attacked.

Instead of making the story about white supremacy, they made it about the 99 % of other people who stood in solidarity with that community.

But they didn't just issue a statement. They brought it to life with billboards broadcasting those messages of hope across the whole country.

There's a key insight here for social change work. The messages aren't just supporting the Christchurch Muslim community: they're showing New Zealanders how people support that community. It's basic psychology: people are more likely to take actions they see others taking.

That's why it's so important to not only expose behaviour we want to see less of, but promote and celebrate what we want to see more of. Tell people what they should do, not just what they shouldn't.

For human rights, this means focusing on the 'human', not just the 'rights'. I believe the future of human rights work must include efforts to improve human behaviour and interaction, not just the legal frameworks that govern those relations. ■

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CHALLENGING NEGATIVE NARRATIVES AROUND CIVIC SPACE

'The breadth of what you are trying to scoop up in the term civic space makes it a challenge.'

*When you're going out with a message that it's about everything, it's easy for people to hear **nothing**. So, the biggest challenge you have is telling people **what it's really about** and **why it matters.**'*

'THE FRAME WORKER'
Nicky Hawkins



Chioma Agwuegbo & Ibrahim Faruk

Chioma and Ibrahim are part of the Not Too Young to Run movement leadership group in Nigeria, and involved in the spin-off Ready to Run group. Chioma leads a social enterprise called TechHer NG, with a background in mainstream national and international media and communications. Ibrahim works for YIAGA Africa – a non-governmental organisation working on human rights and political participation.

[Youth movement]

'It's almost like people had to unlearn the old narrative that young people aren't capable and learn a new narrative: that young people are able to lead, can also hold public office, can run for office and win and do as well as anyone else.'



The Not Too Young To Run movement

[Ibrahim]: Since 2008, the movement has tried three times (and failed twice) to get a constitutional amendment to enable young people to run for public office. We wanted more young people to be able to stand as candidates in elections and to be represented in politics.

Finally, in 2018, the constitution was amended to allow people aged 25 and above to stand as candidates in elections for the House of Representatives and other offices, except for the Presidency and Senate, which we had to concede to stay at 35 years.

The third attempt, which began in 2016, applied lessons learnt from the previous experiences. This was also when we coined the name Not Too Young To Run.

Changing the movement's name

The name change was incredibly important for the movement. It was previously known as the Constitutional Review Campaign. But this was vague and not exactly exciting, making it harder to connect with young people who were our primary constituency.

Not Too Young To Run quickly became a slogan and a hashtag that didn't need further explanation. Young people started having fun with it and using it in their campaign posters.

It also helped to build cohesion in the movement. One of our strengths was that our movement reflected Nigerian diversity – whether that's ethnicity, language, geography, or political affiliation. There are a lot of potential divides. Not Too Young to Run united us as young people regardless of our differences.

[Chioma]: Our structure and way of working also helped. We had several layers of managing the campaign.

We had our 14-person strategy team that all stayed on message, no matter the platform. And we worked closely together to ensure that we weren't upsetting religious and cultural sensitivities. Those things are critical in Nigeria.

But it wasn't just us 14. For each of Nigeria's 36 states we had state coordinators, and behind them committees of young people engaged and connected.

Whatever conversation or debate we were having nationally, they were also happening across 36 states. If you are hearing the same message from Abuja, from the North, South, East, and West, that's not the kind of voice you want to ignore.

We had 200+ organisations spread across the country who aligned with the bill. When we shared content in English, we had people turning it into other Nigerian languages. This helped to build consensus and the groundswell of support.

[Ibrahim]: Collectively we defined the values we stood for as a movement. This helped us to be clear when entering into collaborations with other organisations.

We weren't going to budge on our values. Instead we were intentional in what we stood for. This helped us to continue singing from the same hymn sheet.

It is also why we built Ready to Run and why we continue as a movement. The constitutional amendment passed, but we have still a long way to go to really



change the way society sees young people's participation in politics and to shift that narrative fully.

What kind of narratives are you up against?

[Ibrahim]: Young people are questioned on their capacity to do things. This is not just a Nigerian thing. It is part of our African culture, where age is equated to wisdom.

There's a culture of 'respect', where you show respect for elders and you have to wait for your turn to lead. Leadership is seen as the responsibility and exclusive preserve of a group, usually an older group of men.

The story goes that young people are impulsive, irresponsible, rash, inexperienced and don't have the capacity to hold leadership positions.

This means there is a huge amount of pressure on young people and they are held to a much higher standard than older people.

Turning attacks from weaknesses into strengths

[Chioma]: One of our biggest critics, who had a 300,000 strong following on social media, said we had our heads in the sand, that the bill wasn't popular and that it wouldn't pass.

So we asked him to do a twitter poll to prove us wrong. We really wanted to hear what people had to say against it.

He ran the poll and based on the results we re-aligned our message. It gave us a ton of ideas of what to say and how-to say it. We wouldn't have known that otherwise.

During the campaign we were called out for being elites working from Abuja. But we didn't just respond, we used this attack to strengthen ourselves.

We adjusted our messaging: this is for everyone – go and find your state coordinator – sharing their contact details via social media and in doing so also making the network more visible and affording the state coordinators the visibility and credibility they needed to engage their legislators.

Strategies to shift the narrative

[Ibrahim]: It's almost like people had to unlearn the old narrative that young people aren't capable and learn a new narrative: that young people are able to lead, can hold public office, can run for office, and can win.

We celebrated young people who were proving these old narratives wrong. Those in technology, entertainment, sports, and NGOs who had broken the myth. Their visibility helps change the narrative.

When we ran a debate, we heard the arguments levelled against young people. We asked ourselves: what do young people need to be exposed to, to put them on a level footing with their older counterparts?

That's why we evolved into Ready to Run, a platform that seeks to help young aspiring candidates and leaders to strengthen their own capacities.

We ran television shows and radio shows where young people could come and talk about their plans if they got elected into office.

We ran labs that connected them to existing young political figures or leaders so they could learn about the political realities.

Gradually we started to see a shift; people started to engage on the issues rather than the candidate's age.

Lessons for others

[Chioma]: ***Change is slow and tough and will require making difficult political decisions***

We had to make the decision to concede in some areas, which is why the Senate and the Presidency age still stand at 35.

Don't try to go it alone

Nigeria is a country of 180 million people – you can't do much just by yourself and succeed. Collaboration is key, engaging with people and building that support.

Accept criticism

Something we learnt about accepting criticism is that it's good, it gives you the data you need to realign your messaging.

Messaging is mad important

Defining what your message is, how to get your message out, ensuring your message is not distorted. Staying on message together is so critical.

[Ibrahim]: ***Learning from your mistakes makes those mistakes worth making***

Those two first attempts did not meet our expectations but we learnt from them and it made us stronger.

Value the skills and networks that partners bring

We succeeded because everyone brought everything they had to the collaboration table. ■

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the NORMS SHIFTER



Majandra Rodriguez Acha

Majandra is Co-Executive Director of FRIDA: The Young Feminist Fund. FRIDA is run by young feminist activists and supports young feminist movements across the global South. Majandra is also Co-Founder of TierrActiva Perú, a collective and national network working towards system change for 'buen vivir' (the good life). She is also connected to other activist movements and spaces, such as Tamboras Resistencia and the Laboratorio Nacional de Activismo.

[Feminist activism]

'It's these fundamental beliefs and narratives that we need to begin to question and shift. Break down those binaries and build new understandings that look at the deep diversity, interdependency, intersectionality and beautiful complexity of the world.'

What do narratives mean to you?

Narratives permeate everything. In the groups I am connected to we don't sit down and say 'let's talk about narrative', but it is everywhere and in everything that we do.

And I think it's a big part of activism in general. Because ultimately, we are trying to shift narratives and common understandings about how society should work, and question what is seen as 'the norm'.

A lot of young feminist activism is about changing and shifting social norms, and questioning the systems and ideas that underpin them.

Shifting norms and systems

The young feminist movements that FRIDA support are very clearly working towards shifting norms.

They speak about things that are uncomfortable to speak about. They question what we consider to be the norm or what is acceptable.

These young feminists are spearheading a lot of really deep transformations by questioning narratives and understandings of how the world works. And in particular, questioning gender roles, and how men and women relate to each other, and gender and sexuality more generally.

The social challenges and issues that we confront are deeply systemic in nature. They are about the social, political, economic, cultural, spiritual systems we live in, how those systems are set up, and the understandings that underpin them.

Basic notions about how the world works and how humans and nature relate to each other are at the root of a lot of the violence,

inequality, discrimination, and stereotypes that we see in society.

For example, they are binary and hierarchical worldviews that separate out 'man' over 'nature', 'reason' over 'emotion', science over the arts, men over women.

It's these fundamental beliefs and narratives that we need to begin to question and shift. Break down those binaries and build new understandings that look at the deep diversity, interdependency, intersectionality and beautiful complexity of the world.

This will allow us to recognise and value difference based on respect and dignity, and to value interdependency rather than domination.

Challenges facing young feminist activists

We are very aware that young feminist activists are facing a closing civic space and rising fundamentalism.

This means increased vigilance, surveillance, criminalisation of activists in general and the normalisation of racism and hate speech.

The normalisation of extreme fundamentalist and very conservative discourse really impacts young feminist activists, young women and young trans folk in particular around the world.

It's important for us to recognise that young feminist activists are the experts of their own reality. They know what's best in their context and work.

So, we try to listen to what is helpful for them and not impose things. For some groups, a lot of online noise, social media and so on is helpful. For other groups that's putting them at more risk.

We try to protect groups as much as we can, not revealing information that they don't want to be revealed to the public.

We take holistic security very seriously. And we have measures for protecting data, privacy, and communications. We work with staff focal points that keep connected to regions and countries to keep a real time track of what's going on at the local level so we can react and respond.

What narratives and attacks do you get?

We've seen *feminazi* being used a lot, as well as other stigmatising narratives.

The term *feminist* also carries with it a huge weight because of how it's been interpreted by mainstream and fundamentalist actors.

Sometimes the term itself is not only useful but it's part of the struggle, we are fighting for the term feminism to be understood.

Yes, we are feminists, and that might make some uncomfortable but that's also what we want to do – that can also be a strategy. But for others it's not so useful, or they don't feel represented by the term, and we see and value that as well.

We encounter a lot of ageism. Civil society sees us as young, with infinite time and energy, always willing say yes and work voluntarily. People get excited and come to us with all these questions but they don't compensate us for our time, knowledge and experience.

A couple of months ago, FRIDA shared something on social media comparing the impact of COVID-19 thus far with numbers of deaths from violence against women, to open up the question about what society



chooses to define as a 'crisis', and how we react differently to different crises.

We had the usual social media trolls and people saying you are not considering that men also suffer, or that there is domestic violence against men too.

We aren't trying to negate that men suffer violence, nor the impact of COVID-19. There's an idea that by highlighting the impact on one group, you're saying that there's no impact on anybody else, or any other form of harm.

What lies beneath those attacks?

Beneath this is the normalisation and justification of violence against women. The idea that this is how it is and has always been.

'Why were you drinking? Why did you go to that party?' When you say these things, you're saying: 'You diverged from how things should

be according to my worldview, therefore you are to blame.’

Beneath that narrative is the normalisation of gender roles, assuming women should act in a certain way, and when they don’t, whatever happens is their fault because they were the ones who broke the unwritten rules.

Narratives and political participation

We are seeing a lot of complacency, fear, individualism, isolation, and alienation. The media plays a role in causing fear and separation amongst people.

It’s all systemic, it’s all interconnected and it’s set up to be that way. People are ‘supposed’ to be happy consumers, reproduce, have families, etc. That’s in the interests of the system. And so, there are strong economic forces that uphold that system.

We can see how feminism has been appropriated in mainstream spaces. Powerful actors see that it gets a response, people get riled up and want to do something. They think, ok we can sell you a t-shirt or create this campaign you can click on.

But none of it is fundamentally questioning the system or getting at any of the deep rooted issues. You’re basically just sustaining and reproducing the system.

That conformity isn’t a coincidence. It doesn’t come from nowhere. It’s not like there’s somebody sitting cackling with laughter making it happen either. But all these different forces set up things so that it is better for people to just be happy consumers. Because that maintains the system. And anything different is responded to with a lot of violence – which the media will then immediately amplify and distort.

People become terrified of protesting or thinking outside the box because of the reaction it can have. Plus, there are often limited mechanisms or systems to support people who want to stand up to their boss, partner, teacher, or whoever. So, they feel alone in it and just give up.

Connections and solidarity networks are about building community and letting it be known that it’s not just one or two people, but it’s actually all of these people all around the world, doing all of these things. And it’s so incredibly powerful.

Advice for other activists

We should strive to be happy as we do activism, and enjoy it, because ultimately that’s what it’s about, right?

We all just want to be healthy and safe, and for our loved ones to be healthy and safe, and to have a good relationship with the natural world, to breathe fresh air and all of these beautiful things, not fight and live amidst fear and violence.

We can’t just focus on the hate and the fear, saying ‘we hate this’ or ‘we don’t want that’, but rather focus on the love and solidarity and care that we actually want to see.

We can centre our activism and our work on the positive right now. That’s not a utopia. You can literally do that right now – think about how you can centre that more in your work, in your life.

I mean, definitely go out protesting, demanding your rights. But how can we centre care, joy and pleasure in our activism as well? Because ultimately that what we’re trying to build, with justice and dignity.

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CHALLENGING NEGATIVE NARRATIVES AROUND CIVIC SPACE

*'If civil society exists in the current universe it is going to keep losing. The rules are stacked against you. How do you really break free of them, with a **new narrative**?*

*In that instance it might be really great to have with you an **actual writer** – someone who constructs stories or scripts and who can look for basic narrative devices in the challenges you face.'*

'THE CULTURAL CATALYST'
Ravi Amaratunga Hitchcock



Sonia Jalfin

[Ideas communications]

Sonia is Founder and Director of Sociopúblico, a communications studio focused on public issues. She has a BA in Sociology and MSC in Media and Communications and was Head of the Culture Department at Telefé, a TV broadcaster. Sonia is a journalist and writes a regular column on innovation at La Nación newspaper.

'First you have to open the window of opportunity with your audience. But once they are there, they are ready for complexity.'

At Sociopúblico, we work with think tanks, international organisations, NGOs and fact checkers to communicate complex ideas about public issues.

In the last few years, I've been researching and experimenting with technology, and how to bring ideas from behavioural psychology into our work.

I've always been intrigued by narratives. Even now, working with technology and data, great copy and the story you tell are still the most important things. You need to get that right to make a connection.

The public discourse gap

Today, we see a big gap in public discourse, with people on either side of the gap – a separation of two camps.

Then you have 'opinion bubbles' on social media. We tend to gather with people who think like us. We're not exposed to different ideas.

As communicators of ideas, when we want to bring out a message, we have to bridge that gap to reach everyone. That's hard and you need strategies to do it.

There are also many examples of how diverse relationships can spark creativity and innovation. So even if you don't think of it politically (as a way to have a more vibrant public sphere), from a selfish creative perspective, it's important for us to be in touch with different ideas.

Telling a story: data visualisation and chat bots

Sociopúblico does a lot of data visualisation work. I'm really interested in how to convey

data in a way that is accessible for people who aren't familiar with how to read a chart.

It's about telling the story behind the data. Putting numbers into context. Using the data to answer questions that the audience has, instead of just throwing all the data at them.

We are also working with simple chat bots that tell stories in a more participatory way. We have a game where you become Argentina's Minister of Economy. You start chatting with the President who appointed you and have to make decisions.

In one way it's an explainer, helping you to understand different variables in the economy and consequences of different decisions. But it's also a game, will they fire or hire you?

Another is called Share, Not Share, which we co-created with the Google News Initiative and Red/Acción. You receive news that's been published in different spaces and you decide whether to share it or not, depending on whether you think it is misinformation or real.

After you decide to share or not share, it tells you if it was true. You get clues to help you decide or find out if it's fake news. It's an educational tool that helps you understand misinformation through experimentation and making your own decisions.

An insight coming from behavioural economics is that we tend to believe in things that confirm our existing opinions. We don't question it. And now with social media, we also share it.

Laura Zommer, Executive Director of the fact checker Chequeado, talks about how in Latin America, people tend to share things on WhatsApp 'just in case'. For example, you receive something about your local hospital



running out of supplies, or supermarket running out of milk and you share it with family or friends 'just in case' it's true, even if you doubt the source.

When someone receives it from you, they trust it because you are giving it authority. It would work better if we did the opposite: don't share, 'just in case'.

How tech can boost complex connections

Our bots show us that people tend to stay for a relatively long time: three to five minutes on average. And we got feedback asking for more complexity. This was surprising to us because we were focused on making simple quick games.

We learned that first you have to open the window of opportunity with your audience. But once they are there, they are ready for complexity. That's important for us because we work with the communication of complex ideas. And when you summarise or over simplify, you lose something important.

Yes, we scroll through our social media feeds without stopping on a piece of content for more than three to four seconds. But it's also true that at weekends we stay watching Netflix for five hours. So, we are capable of staying when we feel it's the right time.

Technology helps you make that connection at the right time. For example, sending out messages to people at the time they are most active online. It was much more difficult when you had the morning newspaper and that's it.

Design thinking helps to build around your audience

Design thinking is putting the audience at the centre of whatever you do – at the beginning of your process.

All our innovations are inspired by the question: how can we reach our audience with something that is important to them, that's going to solve a problem for them?

Even for a report, you can ask: what job is this report going to do for someone who reads it?

We tend to be egocentric when we consume information, only paying attention to things that interest us or solve a problem for us.

Sometimes knowledge producers are absorbed by the importance of their ideas. They have trouble thinking about how those ideas can be useful to others.

Build bridges for your audience

Bots and other tools help us bridge the gap between the idea and the audience. They offer a playful moment and help you to learn something.

If you organise your ideas and data around the audience, then it's more likely to be consumed by them. Data is particularly flexible and can be organised around your audience's interests.

Nathan Yau's data visualisation blog [FlowingData](#) does this very well. He got access to a database of all the causes of death in the US over a large period of time.

Typically, a newspaper would use this data to present main trends. But he allowed you to add your age, gender, race, location and his tool will tell you when you are going to die.

Of course, it's an average. But because I'm putting information about me in before I receive information back, it's relevant to me.

We do these kinds of things a lot. And technology helps us to make those ideas happen quickly.

Thinking fast and slow

Daniel Kahneman won a Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences for his work on behavioural psychology. In his book *Thinking, Fast and Slow* he talks about the brain's two systems.

Our system one brain is always on. We use it to decide and act fast, to make sense very quickly of what's going on around us based on images, memories, and so on.

But we have also our system two brain. That's what we use when we are concentrating on something. System two consumes a lot of energy and we can't have it turned on all the time.

When it comes to the communication of complex ideas, we tend to think that everything relates to system two. We forget that audiences spend most of the time going through their lives on system one.

Narratives happens in system one. We can use narratives to connect more easily with our wider audience, and then some of them will also enjoy using their system two to go deeper into our content. ■

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