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BUILDING NARRATIVE POWER

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Pushing back against "backlash": How a common term undermines social change and narrative power

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In the1960s, the term "backlash" was usually expressed as "white backlash" to describe white opposition to the civil rights movement. Since then, it has morphed into a tactic for opposing a wide range of social justice efforts, from gender pay equity to marriage equality to the Movement for Black Lives. Although we can expect resistance to narrative changes that reflect shifts in societal power, and we can prepare for counter-arguments, we must avoid getting distracted or discouraged by claims of backlash.
The problem with focusing on "backlash" is that the term does more than signal opposition; rather, it diminishes hard-fought gains. This is especially true when media outlets report on social- and narrative-change campaigns through the backlash lens. A deeply loaded term, "backlash" is rooted in white rebellion against Black Americans' efforts to gain rights, and it distorts public perceptions of power by portraying dominant groups as victims and oppressed groups as aggressors. "Backlash" blames the folks trying to make change for the very social conditions they are protesting; it erases the people who are withholding what the community wants; and it denigrates our accomplishments by suggesting that we brought backlash upon ourselves.

Defund the Police offers a prime example. The campaign captured the media's attention in the summer of 2020, as organizers sought to shift money away from law enforcement and make the case for more effective ways to spend public safety dollars. Across the nation, organizers and residents took to the streets to demand that our community resources be used to protect us, not endanger us: Police with guns drawn shouldn't be first responders where people need mental health support or other social services. Many communities responded by shifting their budgets. Yet the new narrative faced challenges as some politicians and pundits worried that the slogan — and the protests — set back policy goals, as when the Defund measure failed in Minneapolis. On NPR, Phillip Atiba Goff, CEO of the Center for Policing Equity and professor of African-American studies and psychology at Yale, was asked whether Defund the Police failed to win widespread support because several measures failed. Professor Goff said no. "I disagree with that argument," he told NPR. "From almost the beginning, you saw partisan Democrats saying, Defund is a bad slogan. … For certain, it doesn't work for centrist Democrats. But it wasn't for them," Goff explained. "It was created by activists to engage and activate folks in communities who are enraged by the persistent killing of particularly Black folks in communities that have experienced concentrated disadvantage and vulnerability. And it worked."

The power to define what's true, to determine the story of the past and institutionalize ideas so they replicate, this is narrative power.

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How did it work? "Lots of people got activated around it," Goff said. "They took to the streets, and they've stayed engaged for months…it's overwhelmingly successful."

Beyond sparking highly visible protests, the campaign led to specific policy wins, led by people who are most harmed, and challenged those satisfied with the status quo. It has also changed our public dialogue. "We're having a conversation [on NPR] about it," Goff said. "It's on T-shirts and buttons. You've got a lot of students coming into college and in high school who understand the phrase and what it means and are allowing that to shape what they imagine is possible in public safety. So it's very successful on that dimension."

Even failed policy measures are contributing to shifting the narrative because they are creating "the conditions for evaluating how much we need armed responders…."

Critically, these changes have manifested across different sectors. For example, a growing number of public health practitioners are recognizing that police violence is damaging to population health and are committing to addressing it in their daily work. In 2018 , for example, advocates and public health practitioners built the momentum for the American Public Health Association to denounce police violence. In 2021, these groups convinced APHA to pass a resolution that names the harms of the entire carceral system and provides research illustrating why abolition aligns with goals for health equity. Although more work remains, each victory, like the APHA resolution, moves us closer to a world in which harmful narratives give way to ones that lift us up.

We can expect opposition and cries of backlash whenever we're insisting the status quo must change. As we build narrative power, those cries will diminish.