BUILDING NARRATIVE POWER

2022

A set of resources to understand and build narrative power across institutions and cultural spaces

BUILDING NARRATIVE POWER

BNP

By California Newsreel, in collaboration with:
Higher Ground Change Strategies & Berkeley Media Studies Group

Table of contents

This discussion guide and toolkit is a companion to the animated film Narrative Power: The Epic Adventure. The toolkit was written by Makani Themba of Higher Ground Change Strategies and Berkeley Media Studies Group.

BNPower:
BUILDING NARRATIVE POWER

A set of multimedia tools that explore why some ideas take root while others disappear.

Narrative Power: The Epic Adventure

Animation discussion guide

This Discussion Guide offers questions for reflection or conversation starters to help explore the ideas raised in the film, which you can view at https://bmpower.org/animation. The questions are organized to support individual inquiry or group conversation among colleagues, in coalition meetings, the classroom, workshops and community events. It's best to watch the entire film together leaving plenty of time for discussion afterwards. Try to be as generous with discussion as you see fit. There are also prompts to "go deeper" at your own pace—either as part of the discussion or on your own.

The fundamental tenet is that narratives do not take hold simply by repeating messages. Creating community-driven stories is important, hard work—crucial, in fact, if we are to realize a just world. But even the best stories won't have the effect we want unless we also build narrative power.

To transform dominant narratives, it is necessary to build infrastructure across different organizations and institutions for the long term so our stories become rooted and reproduced by systems and structures across society.

However you found your way to this guide, we hope it will help you amplify your narrative power and build on what you have done before.

Reflections:
What does the film tell us about where we are and how to get where we want to go?

Narrative Power is More Than Powerful Narratives | Questions 1 – 7

1. At the start of the film, Fanny is frustrated that her actions aren't getting the results she wants. She meets Sage the fox who nudges her to think deeply. Reflecting on the film opening, what did the images bring for you? How might they illustrate how narratives shape what we think and who we are?

2. Sages says: "This work is about so much more than messaging. It's about shifting the way structures reproduce meaning on a mass scale." What does that mean to you and your work of narrative change?

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

www.bnpower.org

3. Fannie and Sage explore some of the systems and structures that shape our thinking, knowledge, and beliefs. How do you see the relationship between structures, systems, and narratives?

4. Fannie and Sage explore some of the systems and structures that shape our thinking, knowledge, and beliefs. How do you see the relationship between structures, systems, and narratives?

5. What do you think is the difference between powerful narratives and narrative power? Why is that difference important? What does it make you think about organizing in relation to narrative power?

6. Reflecting on your own work to change narratives and build narrative power, what seeds or narratives are you planting?
   a. How would you describe the soil and conditions that shape how your narratives are taking root and/or growing right now?
   b. How would you describe the narrative "forest" where you are working?
   c. What narratives, if any, are you planting, tending or growing, for lasting change?

7. Reflecting on social justice movements as a whole, in what ways have we "thrown" our stories out there without enough analysis of the conditions? What did Fannie mean by needing to have a plan?

Our Beautiful Legacy | Questions 8 – 12

8. Our crew looked at two examples of building narrative power that helped transform life as we know it, the movements of the 1960s and the tobacco control movement. What do you think Sage the fox meant when he said: "The good news is we don't need to build new narrative power from the ground up. There's already plenty of solid foundation we can work with."
   a. What lessons did you draw?
   b. What, if any, applied to your own work?

9. Are there other moments from history on which you draw for inspiration and guidance in your work to build power and build narrative power? If so, please share at least one.

10. Below is a chart outlining some of the areas where structural power shapes narrative power and vice versa. Please reflect on any additional structures and how they shape narrative power and, if you'd like, add them to the list.

SITES FOR INFLUENCING STRUCTURAL POWER AND NARRATIVE POWER

Schools, Arts, Media, and Culture: Authority to determine what's learned in school; the authority to determine what's "officially" valued as art; the power to control how people interpret and communicate	Shaping the story of the past; choosing what events, facts, memories are important enough to be saved and passed on as knowledge from generation to generation; determining what's beautiful, what's worth preserving, which also shapes the story of who is considered valuable and worthy of dignity. Training professionals on what is considered fact; what's important to know in order to be considered qualified to do their job.
Judicial, Legal, and Legislative: Authority to determine what's legal and illegal	Shaping the story of what's fair, what's safe, what "can be done," what's considered "legitimate" and practical approaches to solving community problems.
Work and Marketplace: Authority to determine wages and prices of goods	Shaping the story of what jobs are valuable, what things are valued, what should be produced, wealth accumulation.
Add your favorites here: *What other sites of structural power do you find as you do your work?*	*How do those sites interact with or reproduce narrative power?*

11. Have you, or groups or movements you've observed, ever tended to the wrong "forest?" What happened? What did you learn? Why do you think our work can sometimes strengthen (versus weaken) harmful dominant narratives?

12. During this segment, we see four legendary changemakers, who are now ancestors, in the sky above our s/heroes: Bayard Rustin, Grace Lee Boggs, Marsha P. Johnson, and Larry Itliong. Please take a moment to learn more about them.

We're On Our Way! | Questions 13 -17

13. After leaving the café, our crew boldly charged ahead only to have their path blocked by the river—an obstacle for which they hadn't planned but strategy helped them get to where they wanted to go. Reflecting on your own work, what tools and methods do you use to:
    a. Assess current conditions?
    b. Develop the vision of what you want to see in the world?
   c. Identify strategies to help you get to your vision?
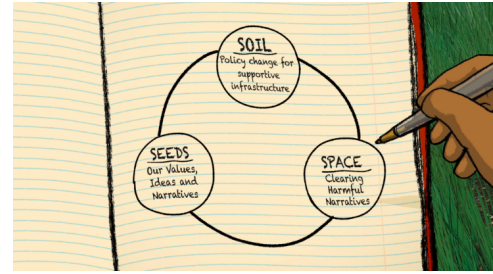
14. We hear about the "big mix" of systems, practice, history, conditions, belief, and power as fundamentally shaping the world and who we are in it. How does this "mix" shape our approach to building narrative power?

15. Reflecting on the examples of the Equal Justice Initiative and the National Domestic Workers Alliance, what are takeaways for your own work?
    a. Are there ideas or strategies you are considering integrating into your own efforts?
    b. Are there other current examples of narrative power building that inspire you?

16. What's your vision of the world you're trying to achieve? What's at the root of your "good" forest?

17. The film closes with our future Fannie in conversation with her granddaughter. What do you think would be a concrete indicator we achieved narrative power in our world that you would want to share with future generations?
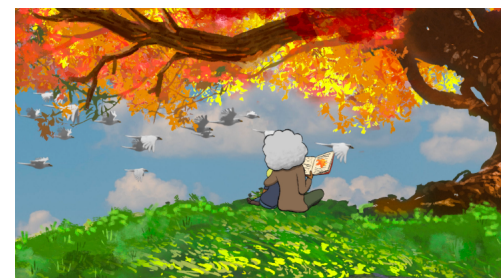
Use the rest of this toolkit to explore ways to transform your ideas into action.

BNPower:
BUILDING NARRATIVE POWER

*A set of multimedia tools that explore why some
ideas take root while others disappear.*

Building Narrative Power Toolkit

Moving from powerful narratives to narrative power

Like going on a long road trip, it's knowing where we want to go, having the mechanics ready to fine tune our vehicle, with training under our belts so we know to swerve around potholes, and sometimes even drive bulldozers if we need to create new roads.

This toolkit is designed to help you explore actions you and others can take to build narrative power where you live and work.

Narrative power is the ability to make the foundation stories we tell-the stories about how things work, our sense of history, who and what matters, and our relationship to one another and the planet-the main stories people use to make sense of the world over time. We don't build narrative power by simply telling stories.

We build narrative power by rooting and reinforcing our stories across the many institutions and cultural spaces that shape what we think, know, and believe. So narrative power is not about any one story and it's not just about storytelling. Narrative power is also about changing—or creating!—the institutions that reproduce our world views not only in what they say but also in what they do.

> *When you begin to imagine and act as if you are living in the world you want to live in, you will have company.*
>
> – Bernice Johnson Reagon –

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

Building narrative power requires a combination of strategies.

Strategies to Tend the Soil:

Advocate for policies that expand the infrastructure to root and reproduce our ideas and values.

If narrative power is a forest grown strong, this is the work we do to create a healthy environment for planting our narratives.

Strategies to Plant & Cultivate Seeds:

Develop and share our values, ideas and stories so that they are aligned, clear and effective.

This is the work we do to make sure that our narratives seeds are healthy and strong so they'll grow with the depth and reach we need.

Strategies to Prune the Forest:

Disrupt harmful narratives that help drive systemic inequities.

This is the work we do to uproot harmful, unhealthy narratives so that our ideas and values will thrive.

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Over time, we need to move on the whole range of strategies for building narrative power but not every organization has to work on every aspect. Some groups may focus on one or another aspect of change—tending, cultivating, or pruning—depending on who they are, what they prioritize, and what their partners are doing.

Key questions to help clarify direction

We need to be bold and fearless in imagining the world we are trying to create. Even though developing a clear vision of where we want to go can be the hardest part of our planning, this is precisely what lets us measure progress and achievements. With a vision, we can assess whether the short-term opportunity is actually taking us in the direction we seek. A clear direction prevents us from confusing short-term opportunities and objectives with our long-term goals for change.

1. **How are you using this moment to build narrative power?**
2. **What criteria can help you assess conditions and identify the near- and long-term outcomes you seek?**
3. **What are the conditions that are hindering or helping you?**

Even if we don't win everything in one campaign, we are creating more possibility with everything we do change—creating what theoretical biologist Stuart Kauffman has coined as "the adjacent possible." We literally change what's possible with each stride we make. We can ask ourselves: What is the adjacent possible that leads to narrative power?

Explore new ideas and how others have done it

Identify the game changers. While specific strategy work for building narrative power and creating new narratives will come largely out of an assessment of the current conditions and visions for transformative change, one way to explore new ideas is to examine how others have done it. Below are examples of work fundamentally restructuring dominant narrative across all three strategy areas. What can you add?

	Tending the Soil	Planting Seeds & Cultivating Plants	Pruning the Forest
Education	Transform school curricula, from textbooks to training teachers, including ensuring accurate, honest teaching of history. Example: Teaching for Change *Teach the Truth Campaign*	Nikole Hannah-Jones and her team at the New York Times conducted in-depth reporting on the U.S. origin story, explaining the pivitol roller of slavery in the nation's history. The 1619 Project continues to advance stories that help explain and contextualize contemporary social problems and their roots in structural racism.	Growing and coordinated efforts (dating back to the 1970s) to document and draw attention to sexism in mathematics textbooks and advocate for better, "more modern" textbooks that are free of gender bias.
Arts & Archival Institutions	Establish public and private funds to support the institutionalization of our stories and imagery (i.e., in museums and as creative projects); sustain and expand alternative media and diverse voices and creators in media and culture across platforms. *Example: Establishing Civil Rights Museums*	The Monuments Project at the Mellon Foundation seeks "to transform the nation's commemorative landscape by supporting public projects that more completely and accurately represent the multiplicity and complexity of American stories."	The removal of statues and other monuments that commemorate racism and conquest. Smokefree Media efforts to pressure movie studios to stop depicting tobacco in films that kids were likely to watch. https://smokefreemedia.ucsf.edu/

	Tending the Soil	Planting Seeds & Cultivating Plants	Pruning the Forest
Mass Media	Require public broadcasters to present controversial issues fairly; establish other policies that hold media outlets and platforms accountable to strong equity and access standards. *Examples:* Equal time doctrines and public oversight and licensing for outlets.	Creating special "beats" at news outlets like dedicated labor, housing, or equity reporting.	A broad coalition of organizations are working to eliminate hate speech from social media platforms. In the Change the Terms campaign, advocates conducted independent, community-led policy research and analysis to document the harms and provide evidence supporting the demands. The coalition is applying high profile pressure on the major social media platforms, calling out their irresponsible disregard for their own policies that amplify harmful content.
Housing	Establish housing as a human right and a critical social good rather than as a commodity to generate wealth. *Example: Causa Justa::Just Cause and Alameda County Public Health Department's collaboration Development without Displacement*	Advocates and public health practitioners illustrated how displacement harms those forced out, those left behind, and our entire society, pointing to solutions that protected tenants and emphasized non-market based approaches to housing and community development. The new narrative was a foundation for community meetings, legislative hearings, news conferences, developing policy platforms, and more.	The *Development without Displacement* report challenged dominant narratives that increase inequity; prepared spokespeople to pitch alternative stories that reframed housing as a health issue; and used the new narratives in work to advance specific solutions.
Transportation	Develop a legal and policy framework that ensures access to public goods and services for everyone, including those living with disabilities. *Example: ADAPT advocacy to establish local and national transportation access and more, including the enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act*	Disability rights activists shifted local, state, and federal policy while also shifting the narrative about themselves. They became the protagonists in their own stories, changing the narrative from one of people to be shut off from society and pitied, to people with a right to be visible, included and with agency.	Activists challenged negative stereotypes of differently-abled people and fought for roles in films and other media that depicted the full humanity of people living with disability including projects like Children of a Lesser God, Life Goes On, and LA Law. Work continues to broaden our understanding of access and participation, including action to help people understand that not all disability is visible.

	Tending the Soil	Planting Seeds & Cultivating Plants	Pruning the Forest
Environment	Challenging the fundamental, deeply embedded idea that our actions have no impact on climate, that "it is just nature doing what nature does." *Example:* Developing fields of study to forge a broad and credible body of knowledge on the climate crisis. Building public support and understanding of the climate crisis by embedding their ideas across a range of structures.	Developing and disseminating school curricula including climate and environment related math problems; establishing endowed chairs and degree programs in ecology, climate, and sustainability; establishment of environmental impact reports; journals, documentary and commercial films, books, music and children's literature. This narrative infrastructure was developed to support its agenda for structural change.	Documentaries, books, and academic research exposing Big Oil and others who try to make global warming about individual action rather than corporate malfeasance and what we can do together to make a difference.

To clarify your power-building strategy, consider:

- How does this campaign or action build structural and narrative power for not only this campaign, but future work to reach our vision?

- Who else do we need to partner with to change the current narrative and build narrative power?

- What does it mean to do this work with "community at the center"? What happens when community leads?

- What do we need to build internal capacity? Do we need well-trained spokespeople? Do we need people in other positions to carry the work?

- What do we need to build a robust infrastructure to support or create out own spaces to tell our stories? How do we get our people to the microphone?

We also need to build narrative power infrastructure. This means developing the tools and support systems that advocates at all levels (local, state, national) need to do the work and make progress. Infrastructure includes:

- Operating support for the groups doing the organizing, advocacy, and research;

- Technical assistance for those groups on policy, law, science, community organizing, and coalition building; and

- Various supports for direct communication, such as:

  o Support for newsrooms to better reflect their audiences and tools and training for journalists to tell more complete stories

  o Media advocacy training and support for residents, advocates, and journalists' other sources.

A well-developed infrastructure fosters a network of organizers, advocates, researchers, and media makers, convening them to stimulate creative thinking, learn from each other, and cement relationships and commitments to creating our healthy future.

Reframing for a new big picture[1]

Reframing – the work of literally shifting how key publics understand an issue or idea, what they believe about that issue and idea and how the structures that provide meaning and context in shaping ideas/ issues work to shape your issue specifically – is not a short term project. However, there are short, intermediate and long-term framing projects that we can undertake right now to move us forward. One way to imagine this process is to think of it as building a bridge. You need to know the two points you want to connect before you can begin. In our case these two points are moving from A) the current context, aka "WE ARE HERE" to B) building the infrastructure and changing conditions necessary to creating the transformation we seek, a.k.a. "THERE." We have to be clear about the location of both points in order to bridge them effectively.

The work of bridging these two points requires attention to the gaps in knowledge, belief and value differences that hold us in the current context. We must also pay attention to the assets and resources available right now that will help us get further faster. Figure 1 shows how this process of inquiry works to develop framing and re-framing strategy. We usually populate the answers in the first and third column, and then return to the middle column to "build the bridge" from "here" to "there."

[1] This is adapted from *Weathering Together: Resilience as a Vehicle to Reshape and Reimagine Policy, Political Will and the Public*, for the Pathways to Resilience Working Paper Series, published May 2014. The full paper is available here.

**Figure 1: Identifying key framing/re-framing activities
(adapted from "Weathering Together")**

Addressing the Current Context	Bridging Toward Our Goals	Building Infrastructure/Making the Change
● What are the current conversations and "state of belief" on this and related issues among our key constituencies? ● How are the words that define our frame being defined in the public conversation? What room is there for *our* definition(s)? ● Who are the actors shaping the conversation and what is their credibility? What are the opportunities for amplifying our voices? ● What institutions and structures play a role in shaping our thinking and belief about the issue and how do they shape them? ● Is there a sense that we can solve these issues? What solutions are being offered?	● What must our constituencies and other key "publics" understand and agree on in order to support this agenda? ● What "evidence" (stories of success, data and beyond) needs to be developed and disseminated to build credibility for our framework? ● What are the fundamental, competing beliefs that must be deconstructed/ reconstructed to create more "social space" for supportive beliefs? ● Where/how can we intervene and shift how these institutions operate in the shaping of discourse and belief? ● What are the opportunities to provide a glimpse into a future with our better policy ideas?	● What will the public conversation and belief look like and sound like when we succeed? ● What are the key concepts and terminology that will help drive this era of transformation and how and where will they be defined? ● Who will be considered experts and their input critical to informed decisionmaking? ● What kinds of meaning/beliefs would transformed structures/ institutions produce and how would they produce them? ● What will be considered best practice and good policy?

Figure 2 (next page) is an example populated with some of the key framing activities to be done to advance an environmental justice. As you use this tool for your specific issue or idea you are working to reframe, it is important to note that this is not a linear process. We must test and develop a comprehensive strategic communications approach that incorporates all of these elements over time as they overlap, inform and shape each other.

Figure 2: Examples of key framing/re-framing activities to advance environmental justice (adapted from "Weathering Together")

Addressing the Current Context	Bridging Toward Our Goals	Building Infrastructure/ Making the Change
● Polling, surveys and focus group research to identify beliefs and understanding among key segments ● Get out front in defining the term for the broader publics ● Advance govern together/better together themes ● Building on beloved community themes to increase sense of shared stake in collaboration for sustainable/resilient/ fair/compassionate nation ● Delegitimize opposition policies as lose-lose propositions; Delegitimize corporations that profit from status quo as credible spokespersons in the debate; Increase credibility of "green" voices ● Unmask opponents' misleading tactics including fake science, fake "victims" of protective policies, "AstroTurf" lobby groups, corporate authored sermons to wrap propaganda in religious terms	● Expand resources that translate the science/evidence into metrics and stories that are more easily understood ● Provide practical, sensible solutions that help the public see how we make a difference beyond individual change ● Tell stories about models for economic, governance, collaboration and ecological practice that works (i.e., health in all policies, cooperation economy, etc.) ● Tell stories that help reinforce our connectedness as human beings across race, class, nation status. ● Develop a compelling story of the future that goes beyond how we try to fix the problem. ● Counter Dominion frame with "good stewards" frame, aware of our interconnectedness with all life and responsibility for the planet	● Build public support for corporate regulation and accountability and incentives for triple bottom line investments ● Build shared public understanding and support of good stewardship and human rights frameworks as foundational principles for policy and practice ● Build support for revenue generation mechanisms such as affirmative tax reform, land valuation and green credits ● Shift official language, definitions, operating policies and recommended and/or best practices to align with our framework ● Ensure this framework and underlying values are integrated in key curricula including K-12, human rights education, professional training and key disciplines, e.g., planning.

14

Laying the foundation for effective meta messages

These framing activities taken together can form a potent basis for the development of supportive meta messaging – overarching themes that provide a communications and storytelling framework at the movement or mass level. Such high level messaging is best developed collaboratively, where the "on the ground" expertise of advocates and other key stakeholders can inform its focus and content.

Cognitive linguist George Lakoff describes three levels of messaging. Level 1 is the expression of broad, overarching values like fairness or responsibility — the core values that motivate us to change the world. Level 2 is the issue we work on, like housing, the environment, schools, or health. Level 3 is about the nitty-gritty of those issues, including the policy detail or strategy for achieving change. Using messaging about climate crisis and resilience as an example, most climate messaging with few exceptions, tends to hover at the most detailed level of expression. This can make connecting with broad publics difficult at Level 1 where the broadest numbers of people connect in the deepest way. According to Lakoff, people's support or rejection of an issue will be determined by whether they can identify and connect with the Level 1 value. Values are motivators, and messages should reinforce and activate values.

Developing meta messages to advance a comprehensive framework requires identifying broad values that cut across our different Level 2 (and 3) issues. The key to a meta message is not that every advocate across the panoply of work utters the same words. Rather, in the context of all our messages, we should voice the same underlying Level 1 or broad values. In addition, meta messages emphasize interconnection or how issues and values fit together in a landscape or context rather than as an individual issue "portrait" or campaign. Surfacing connective or meta messaging requires time for planning and building a shared analysis that connects the dots between issues and campaigns.

For more examples of using the Level 1-2-3 framework see "Talking about our recovery from COVID: How public health practitioners can emphasize equity."

Power mapping planning tool

A primary target is a decisionmaker with authority or the power to grant your policy issue. Primary targets (versus a more secondary target that has influence over your primary targets) are central to winning your initiative; therefore, they are central to your power map. Identify up to three primary targets on your issue and complete the chart below for each. Charts for opponents and allies are below. Try to be as realistic as possible in your assessment.

Chart Instructions:
Primary Target – Name each target separately. Do not list an entire decisionmaking body. Name individuals.

Elected/Appointed by – Identify whether the individual is elected by a specific geographic constituency or appointed by a mayor, county board, etc. Name the office or body that is responsible for the appointment when applicable.

Key Interests and or Conflicts Related to the Issue – Examples of key interests include family member involvement in housing development, past opposition or support on related issues, financial conflicts, financial and political interests of close allies, past and/or current championing of the issue and/or related issues. This will require research including online searches, review of political contributions and financial records, interviews with veteran activists and others with insight, etc.

Power/Leverage You Have Over Them – If they are elected, you have power in their re-election. Consider pressure tactics that have worked previously like media exposure, engagement of key organizations and leaders as allies, traditional protest tactics and relationships with key supporters and/or family members.

To whom/what do they read/watch/ listen? Who are the influentials they listen to? What media outlets are they most likely to listen to/read and engage? You will be mapping these secondary targets later. Prioritize those that are most influential with your target.

Support Ranking – On a scale of 1-10 with 10 being a very strong ally and 1 being die hard opposed, rank each target.

Primary Target	Elected/Appointed by	Related Key Interests and/or Conflicts	Power/Leverage You Have Over Them	What/who do they read/watch/listen to?	Support Ranking

Who are the groups and individuals that may oppose you? Use the chart below to identify at least three opponents, identify their strengths or power in this effort and weaknesses or where they are vulnerable/can be divided, rendered ineffective and/or shifted to support. Then, rank how much they are opposed using the same scale from above. Then, rank them according to how important their role is in winning this issue on a scale of 1-10 with 1 being the highest priority.

Opponent	Strengths	Weaknesses	Support Ranking	Priority Ranking

Now, think of those key individuals and organizations that will help you build the power needed to move your initiative. Identify three that are actually allies or would be likely to support (those should be identified as potential) and complete the chart below.

Key [Potential] Allies	What would they gain by joining you?	What assets/power/ resources do they bring ?	Support Ranking

Cutting your issue: An interactive process you can use with your group

(100 minutes)

Session goals:

- Develop group criteria for issue development
- Practice choosing an issue and refining issues into an advocacy initiative
- Practice setting initiative goals by group consensus

☼ Overview: Defining An Issue (10 minutes)

You've gathered information from your community and you've identified assets and challenges to help inform your group's strategy. Now, you must take all that information and choose the best *issue* to work on. An issue is defined as a broad problem area -- like alcohol and tobacco billboards or teen pregnancy. There are always lots of issues to choose from. The best way to choose is from a criteria developed by group consensus that takes into account group and/or community values and interests (i.e., what's important).

Community values and interests are the ideal visions and the down-to-earth concerns we carry in our daily lives. They range from dreams of a safe, green world for all families to fears that the wrong kind of neighbors will move in. Advocates must factor in sentiment from both sides of the spectrum in order to identify issues that have meaning for the people with whom we work.

Real vs. Ideal Interests. Interests are usually divided into two categories: real interests and ideal interests. Ideal interests are usually articulated in lofty vision statements like, "a great future for all children." Real interests are those issues that have an impact on our daily lives. They are the company bottom line, our property values, our own children or jobs, to name just a few. Advocates often focus on ideal interests and pay little attention to real interests when choosing issues and framing their initiatives. A good issue provides your group with opportunities to encourage community visioning but is grounded in the real interests and concerns of people where they are.

Trigger question: If anyone in the group has experienced opposition in their advocacy work, did the opposition rely on arguments focused on real interests or ideal interests? What did you do?

Other considerations in developing criteria. All advocacy must operate within the framework of your organization's purpose and long range goals. It's important to compare your organization's goals with the goal for your issue. In your assessment you should ask yourself: what constitutes victory? How will this effort address the problem/have an impact on the quality of life of your clients/members and/or community?

Another important consideration is your organizational health and survival. Can you win? Or perhaps more importantly, can your organization afford to lose? Advocacy campaigns can strengthen organizations by building a sense of team spirit, expanding the leadership base, deepening the leadership's level of experience and expanding an organization's membership and contact base. Of course, your organization must bring something to the campaign in the first

place (i.e., membership, staff, money, reputation, facilities, press contacts, allies, etc.). Make a careful assessment of your assets as well as any liabilities you bring to the effort.

Exercise: Brainstorming Criteria (15 minutes)

🕐 Facilitator's Note: Ask participants to brainstorm a criteria for choosing an issue. Trigger questions for brainstorming: What would get you to volunteer to work on an issue? What interests would a good issue address? What would an organization want to get out of working on an issue?

Record responses on chart paper and then quickly debrief responses to see what criteria emerged. If necessary refer to the sample criteria at the end of this section for additional ideas.

✿Overview: Distilling an issue into an advocacy initiative (15 minutes)

Once you've identified the issue, you must refine that issue into an *initiative*. An initiative is a planned set of activities, with clear goals and objectives, that your group will undertake to address some part of the issue. No initiative can address an entire issue, but it should be well-defined, doable and have a clear impact on your issue.

An initiative plan has three main parts:

Goal or what we want to accomplish. The goal should be easily understood and should meet as much of a group's criteria as possible. A good goal requires cutting or shaping the issue into effective, doable action that engages community interest and support.

Target or decisionmaking body with the power to enact the action sought. The difference between education and advocacy efforts is that advocacy seeks concrete institutional changes. Having broad segments of the community as target populations are fine for outreach and health education, it simply doesn't work as well in advocacy initiatives. Every initiative must identify a clear target or decisionmaking body that can enact the institutional change required to achieve the goal. For example, when developing an initiative to ban alcohol and tobacco billboards near schools, the group must identify who best to make this happen. City council zoning ordinance? Billboard company policy? State law? Each potential decisionmaking body or target will mean different organizing strategies. Identifying the target is central to initiative planning because it focuses the rest of the outreach toward moving the target to action.

Note: Don't confuse target and allies you need in order to win. Primary targets are always the individuals or decisionmaking body that ultimately have the power to grant group goals. There are lots of folk to work with and convince along the way, but they are not targets. (See materials on assessing targets in the back of this section for more information).

Objectives necessary to achieve the goal. Once the group has identified the goal and target, they are ready to develop an action plan or set of objectives and timeline to make it happen.

Cutting Your Issue + Goal Activities   www.highergroundchangestrategies.net

Another example of adept "issue cutting" is found in the Baltimore Citywide Liquor Coalition's (BCLC) efforts to ban alcohol and tobacco billboards in most areas of Baltimore. Here again, themes emphasizing youth targeting and race and class exploitation proved effective in mobilizing communities -- with a local twist. The coalition successfully transcended apathy around tobacco control by linking billboards to "bread and butter" issues of neighborhood blight, bias and economic development.

When the Baltimore coalition chooses an issue they employ the WRIST test. For every initiative they consider, they ask is it:

Winnable?
Real?
Immediate?
Specific?
Tangible?

According to BCLC organizer Kevin Jordan, issue development is one of the most important steps in developing media and organizing strategy. It will determine your allies, your target and your power base. In fact, organizers who use the WRIST criteria have a saying that illustrates its importance: "If you want to make a fist, you've got to have a WRIST."

SAMPLE CRITERIA FOR CHOOSING AN ISSUE

- It will result in real improvement
- Winnable and/or We build and are stronger even if we "lose"
- Something must be done and we are best positioned to do it
- Specific and/or local
- Short term victory possible
- Community is concerned about it
- It will shift the balance of power for the better
- It aligns with our goals and vision
- We have the resources to see it through
- It will help build/strengthen our organization
- It affects people's real interests
- It will open up opportunities/possibilities for more hope, better ideas
- Brings us closer to our vision
- It will help us fundraise
- It will help build leadership in our ranks

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BONUS: Exercise: Identifying initiative goals (60 minutes)

Facilitators Note: Ask participants to brainstorm issues on which they'd like to work. Let them know that they will vote on which group they will join. Set a minimum number for small group size so that the number of small groups will not exceed scheduling and facilitation capacity. If there's one facilitator and the time prescribed in this curriculum outline, there should be no more than five groups. In a large group of 30-40 people, minimum group size should set at five people per group as small groups will vary according to interest.

(Other ways to develop small groups: Some facilitators avoid this part of the exercise all together by choosing four or five issues from participants' previous work and assigning participants into groups. Others ask participants to select issues in advance.)

Record the list of issues legibly on chart paper. After a few minutes of brainstorming, let participants know that it will take five (or other number) to make a group. Read all of the issues through once before the vote to make sure everyone understands each issue. Participants will vote once for the issue of their choice with a show of hands. Issues that have the minimum support required to be a group are set. Issues with no support are crossed out. Issues with less than five supporters go into the negotiation round.

In the negotiation round, review only those groups that have votes, but not enough to become a group. Anyone in a set group (with enough support) can not move except to move from a group that has more than enough support to a group in need of more members -- if they choose. Two groups with similar issues can combine, as long as combining helps them to meet the minimum support requirements. Others can simply opt to leave a "too small" group for a "set" group.

Once groups are set (and some exceptions can be made for the sake of time), groups will meet to develop an initiative goal for their issue. Each group should have a recorder. Groups are to develop a clear goal that is 25 words or less; has a clear target (i.e., institutional decisionmaking body or individual) and is easily understood. They have 25 minutes.

After small group time is up, participants should report out their initiative goal and target. Make sure to avoid cross talk and criticism between groups and keep questions focused on clarification. After all of the goals and targets are reported, take a few minutes to debrief, synthesize and land. This may take an additional

BONUS: Assessing your targets

List who/what institutions has/have the power to solve the problem and grant your demands? When possible, list specific names. Identify which is the most important target for achieving your policy goal.

_____

_____

_____

_____

Who must you get to first before those listed above? Be specific:

_____

_____

_____

_____

List strengths and weaknesses of each target:

Target	Strengths	Weaknesses

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Assessing Your Targets (Continued)

Which targets are appointed? Elected?

_____

_____

_____

How do you have power/influence with them (as voters, consumers, taxpayers, etc.)?

_____

_____

What is the self-interest of each?

_____

_____

Who would have jurisdiction if you redefined the issue (e.g., turned a tobacco advertising issue into a fair business practice issue)? Does this help you?

_____

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Go in-depth: Examples & tips

Tobacco as a public health hazard: Building infrastructure for lasting narrative power

By: Lori Dorfman, Berkeley Media Studies Group, and Makani Themba, Higher Ground Change Strategies

The tobacco control movement built narrative power to drastically shift social norms and dominant narratives around smoking. Even though there are still issues to be addressed, even if some policies are weakened, even if most people forget how hard-fought the wins were, we can be confident that our society will never go back to a state in which it is normal and encouraged to smoke in public places. This is narrative power for social change.

Over the course of decades, public health advocates and journalists were able to wrest control of rhetoric about smoking away from the tobacco industry. They transformed the dominant narrative from smoking as a personal choice to tobacco as a public health hazard. Building this kind of narrative power, alongside other forms of power, paved the road for systemic solutions like excise taxes, regulations to keep the product out of public spaces, or change the product itself (like eliminating menthol). This idea of tobacco as a public health hazard has been replicated, reproduced, and reified since the 1960s—it is now the dominant narrative on tobacco.

Building lasting narrative power requires that progressive visions and values be repeated across sectors and in a range of locations, from the living room to the board room, over the long term until those ideas and values become the default. Building that kind of narrative infrastructure means developing the tools and interconnected support systems at all levels to make progress. It includes operating support for the organizations doing the organizing, advocacy, and conducting research; technical assistance for those groups on policy development and policy advocacy, law, science, community organizing, and coalition building; and various supports for direct communication, including support for journalists to tell more complete stories and media advocacy training for journalists' sources.

A well-developed infrastructure fosters a network of organizers, advocates, researchers, and media makers by convening them to stimulate creative thinking, learn from one another, and cement relationships and commitments to creating our healthy future. It can also build capacity to understand how policy and systems change occur, understand what's been successful and what needs improvement, learn how to forefront racial and health equity in the process of making these changes, and see how to identify leverage points across issues.

However, to build lasting narrative power, we fundamentally need to know what we want to accomplish, what needs to change to achieve our goals, and how to make that change happen. Naming those changes — both big and visionary as well as narrow and precise — is essential.

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

To gain clarity and precision in naming what we want, we can ask: Who decides? Who decides what research is needed? What the policy demand is? How resources are distributed? What organizing and advocacy to support? What network to create and nurture? What are the sites where we can enact change? Who decides what success looks like and what we've learned from our efforts? And how can the change we are seeking today set us up for the next issue we want to win and the narratives that will help us get there?

In the case of tobacco control, advocates built a strong infrastructure to build and wield narrative power, enabling people across the country to share knowledge and bring anti-tobacco efforts to scale. People in all sectors began to see that it was reasonable to hold the industry accountable and to call on government to take action. The result was a wholesale transformation of how, as a nation, we regard tobacco. Foundations and government provided strong support for advocates, researchers, and residents. That support allowed researchers to investigate policy, advocates to bring those policies to life at the local level, residents to engage in communities, and researchers to study how to counter the rhetoric that Big Tobacco was using to thwart policy change.

Transforming the narrative on tobacco took hard work, forward thinking, and support for advocacy and communication. Change came through repeated efforts and changing emphasis at different times or by different groups, depending on circumstances. Sometimes those were explicit strategy decisions, and sometimes parallel efforts from different groups converged, and, at times, not everyone agreed on the best next step. But fundamentally, advocates have and continue to remain aligned on maintaining a lasting dominant narrative that tobacco is a health hazard and solutions require systemic changes. Let's look more closely at the tobacco control movement and each of the components used to build a lasting infrastructure for narrative power.

Tobacco Control: An Example of Building Infrastructure for Narrative Power
Two notes on this table. First, overall strategy—knowing what you want and how to get it—is the driving force behind the components of narrative infrastructure. Second, the relationship among the components listed here is not linear. The components often operate at the same time, and any component may need repetition or emphasis at different times or by different groups depending on circumstances. Making those decisions is what strategy discussions are all about.

	Component	Building narrative power in tobacco control
	Research Who is asking the questions?	Government and foundations invested public and private dollars in research that evolved from establishing the harm of tobacco as long ago as the 1920s to later investigating how to effectively reduce tobacco use to more recent use of community-led research as the foundation for policies that center equity.
	Resources Who decides who will be supported to do the work?	Resources for research and advocacy came from varied sources over time as institutions saw the importance of reducing the harm of tobacco: federal dollars via the National Cancer Institute and the Office on Smoking OR Health; excise taxes to support state and local action; state attorneys general negotiating the Master Settlement Agreement; private funds from foundations like the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and donors through the American Heart Association, American Lung Association, American Cancer Society, and others.

🏛	***Litigation, legislation, and policy*** How are those who have been most harmed centered in identifying the solutions?	Lawsuits and political pressure on legislatures and government agencies were used to pursue policies for clean indoor air, marketing restrictions, excise taxes, and limiting youth access. BIPOC communities were often at the forefront of calling for these policy changes that targeted their specific needs but also created better health for everyone.
✊	***Organizing and advocacy*** How can the work on this specific issue build longer term narrative power?	Organizers and advocates' actions elevated an evolving narrative on tobacco control, from ASSIST in the 1990s (a partnership of the National Cancer Institute, 17 state health departments and the American Cancer Society) that supported policy and media advocacy to the early 2000s with Policy Advocacy on Tobacco and Health (PATH, a partnership of The Praxis Project and RWJF) that supported local organizing focused on base-building BIPOC organizations and cultivated leadership to the African American Tobacco Control Leadership Council whose work today is finally bringing the FDA to take action to eliminate menthol.
⚇	***Networks*** How does our issue connect to others?	From early multiuser online bulletin boards like the Smoking Control Advocacy Resource Center Network (known as SCARCNet) to today's Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids and the truth campaign focused on youth-led work, tobacco control networks provide community and a common language; regular meetings build trusting relationships and provide safe spaces to exchange ideas. Many networks, like the African American Tobacco Control Leadership Council and Americans for Nonsmokers Rights have focused on racial justice and on protecting workers.
👥	***Training and support*** Who is visible in high stakes situations?	Groups provided sustained policy and media advocacy training and support for public health advocates and researchers. The *Columbia Journalism Review* prepared guides for journalists on reporting on tobacco; trainings for advocates and organizers fostered shared framing around the harms from the industry and the role of government to rein it in. Advocates transferred their media advocacy skills to new policies as they won their battles. News coverage challenged industry.
🧘	***Reflection and evaluation*** Who determines what's working and what should change? What created transformative change?	Policy change was a clear measure of success. But there was more: Those working in tobacco control created formal and informal mechanisms for reflection and evaluation. The Praxis Project's Policy Advocacy on Tobacco and Health created Learning Circles that brought tobacco-control people together with others involved in health-justice work to learn from each other. Over time, thousands participated, building long-term narrative power.
📢	***Communication*** What new stories and frames are	Researchers and advocates shifted the terms of debate through in-depth analysis of the tobacco industry's narratives and then replaced those narratives about freedom of choice with strong,

needed? How do we create noise and sustained echo chambers?

engaging narratives about health and freedom from harm. With media advocacy training, advocates created a common story for news and other media that shifted from a focus on individual behavior to fighting the corrupt tobacco industry. This was useful in engaging a broader base to take action and in engaging reporters who conducted investigative journalism on the tobacco industry. Artists defaced billboards and created counter-ads. Young people staged die-ins to garner media attention. Hollywood produced movies vilifying tobacco industry (and advocates are pressuring Hollywood to get smoking out of movies). African-American communities organized to address particularly harmful tobacco industry practices, which catalyzed a greater focus on racial justice among advocates and media and other across institutions and constituencies: medical and public health associations, unions, city councils and boards, schools, bars and restaurants, rodeos, health departments, base-building and community-based organizations, and congregations.

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Go in-depth: Examples & Tips

Recommendations for journalists: Narrative power in reporting

By: Heather Gehlert, Katherine Schaff, and Lori Dorfman, Berkeley Media Studies Group

10 Tips at-a-Glance

1. **Know how the issue is currently reported in the news.**

2. **Ask questions that reveal the social, environmental, and political context for the issue.**

3. **Elevate the importance of prevention and explore possible solutions, including legal frameworks and effective community-led initiatives that could be replicated elsewhere.**

4. **Rethink traditional news pegs.**

5. **Use precise language to describe the issue.**

6. **Use data—including disaggregated data—to illustrate who is affected and how widespread the issue is.**

7. **Expand sources to include underrepresented voices.**

8. **Be transparent about your sources' background, particularly if they have ties to industry or other groups with a financial stake in a particular outcome.**

9. **Examine connections across issues and beats.**

10. **Be explicit about who is benefiting from (current and historical) structural racism and other forms of oppression that contribute to the issue disproportionately affecting other groups.**

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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As journalists, we have the power to choose what stories get told and what stories don't; decide whose voices we include and whose we don't; elevate some facts or opinions while omitting others. The decisions we make fundamentally affect audiences' understanding of key public health and social justice issues.

Journalists have an extraordinary amount of power to shape how the public view important issues, what policymakers do to address them, and what narratives form the backdrop of people's daily lives. For decades, news outlets recognized this responsibility by striving to be "objective" in their coverage. More recently, journalists are acknowledging that so-called objectivity is a myth—every story has an angle, or frame—and instead aiming to provide readers with stories that are fair, balanced, and accurate. However, old notions of objectivity still plague much of the industry's current coverage, bringing news to readers through a lens that may appear neutral but is anything but. Rather, this lens reflects the status quo, which is still primarily white, heterosexual, able-bodied, and male. The media are undergoing a necessary process, that is not for the faint of heart, of resisting the status quo in the name of fair and representative coverage, not letting the dominant culture override their responsibility to the communities they serve.

Collectively, at a macro level, U.S. media outlets comprise a powerful structure that can influence and shift ideologies and customs. At a micro level, this structure consists of a series of decisions reporters and editors and publishers make. Knowingly or unknowingly, media have been reproducing harmful dominant narratives that perpetuate structural inequity for far too long. We have a responsibility to change them. The following tips, consolidated from three decades of news analysis from BMSG, are designed to help reporters use the narrative power of journalism and media to bring equity forward more thoroughly and effectively across their work.

1. **Know how the issue is currently reported in the news.**

   Coverage shapes our understanding of problems—and what we can do about them. Before journalists can improve their reporting on any issue, it's important to identify gaps, misconceptions, or distortions in the current coverage. What themes are dominant? What themes are missing? Whose voices are framed as valuable and whose are left out? Do solutions appear? Is prevention discussed?

   Let's look at Covid-19 as an example: Conducting research on how the news media has covered COVID will be an important aspect of understanding this pandemic and addressing future disease outbreaks. In covering COVID and other outbreaks, we have seen that media outlets sometimes:

   - Contribute to stereotyping and harassment. For example, the media widely reported the Omicron variant of COVID as the "South African" strain, leading to travel bans on several African countries even as European countries were also facing virus surges.

   - Fixate on vaccine hesitancy, rather than the social norms that fuel it or deeper access issues, such as lack of transportation or time off work.

   - Omit connections between the virus and social factors that affect it, such as housing, job protections, and public transit.

   - Overlook Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities or use quotes from these populations that only describe the problem, rather than solutions.

   - Underutilize community-based organizations. These groups are at the forefront of the COVID response and can do more than provide anecdotes about individual residents who are affected. They can and should also be called on to provide policy expertise, commentary on data and trends, and vital perspectives on solutions.

2. **Ask questions that reveal the social, environmental, and political context for the issue.**

When news stories are framed narrowly, like portraits, they emphasize an individual's role in causing or fixing problems, which can lead to victim-blaming. But when news coverage zooms out and embeds portraits in the landscape, readers and viewers can see the whole picture, the role—and obligation—that our organizations and institutions and government have in helping to dismantle the conditions causing inequities in the first place.

Let's look at sexual violence. Here, the portrait frame holds individuals solely responsible for their own safety, obscures the policies and institutions (like college campuses, youth-serving organizations and others) that can foster a climate where sexual violence can persist, and contributes to the notion that sexual violence is an unfortunate part of life to be managed—rather than a series of behaviors that can be prevented.

For example, after seeing a portrait story about rape, audiences who are asked to talk about solutions might focus on the victim's actions or the character of the person who caused harm. That might mean questioning where the victim went, what they drank, or what they wore—all questions that put the onus on the victim rather than the one who causes the violence. This approach is what fuels advice like telling young women not to walk alone at night, to stick to well-lit paths, and to keep a close guard over their drinks rather than fueling conversations about what we're doing as a society to hold men accountable, eliminate harmful cultural norms around masculinity, teach young boys to recognize and respect healthy boundaries, and, ultimately, keep people safe.

By providing information on the underlying causes and consequences of sexual violence (both to individuals and to society), the media can help the public see that sexual assault is a social problem, rather than a strictly private matter. In stories about sexual violence, journalists can ask questions like:

- What are some of the risk factors at the individual, community, and societal level that make someone more likely to perpetrate rape or other forms of sexual harm?

- What do state laws say about sexual violence? What policy does this employer / campus / institution have in place regarding sexual assault? Is that policy enforced?

- When assaults are reported, who must bear the burden of proof?

- What effects does sexual violence have on health? Education? Economic well-being of men vs women as a result of dominant narratives?

3. **Elevate the importance of prevention and explore possible solutions, including legal frameworks and effective/powerful/proven community-led initiatives that could be replicated elsewhere.**

The prevention perspective, which focuses on root causes and ways to change societal and community norms is not routinely taught in journalism school or in newsrooms. That means reporters will have to actively seek out such information. "Reporting Inequality: Tools and Methods for Covering Race and Ethnicity" is an excellent resource and the only textbook written by journalists for journalists on how to understand and cover the root causes of structural inequities. This framework matters because without direct discussion of causes, audiences will have a harder time envisioning solutions and may be left with the impression that our most pressing social problems are intractable and inevitable.

Decades of research from BMSG shows that news media often focus on problems rather than solutions, and if solutions are mentioned, they are often at the individual level. In coverage of COVID, this showed up as behavioral suggestions (e.g. wear a mask and get vaccinated) verses systemic solutions (e.g. paid sick leave, worker protections, decrease the number of people in prison and without homes, etc.). With COVID, and future pandemics, reporters need to highlight the infrastructure that will support prevention goes beyond health care and public health. Everything from child care to public transportation to wildfire

mitigation (as areas with higher pollution and smoke can worsen COVID outcomes) to climate change policy plays a role. Covering the public health system, including local health departments and community partners, even in the absence of a crisis will help the public understand what prevention can look like on systemic scale.

Any time reporters cover a public health issue, they should ask questions like:

- What community organizations working on the issue are led by those most impacted?

- What is happening in the community to support prevention? Is it working? How can it be supported, scaled up, replicated in other communities, or built upon?

- What do advocates, practitioners, or government officials think should be done?

- What would make those strategies workable in this community?

- How does targeting prevention to those most impacted benefit all of us?

4. Rethink traditional news pegs.

In today's oversaturated information environment and always-on news cycle, it can be difficult for reporters to break through the noise and grab readers' attention. This contributes to a tendency for news outlets to elevate coverage of rare or extreme stories over the more continual or persistent and to focus more on what's known as episodic reporting, such as the aftermath of a mass shooting, rather than thematic, which is more evergreen and explores the consequences of unfair systems in the absence of an urgent crisis. These newsroom conventions make reporting on longstanding social issues and crises that take place over time, like climate change or day-to-day gun violence, especially problematic. However, a little creative thinking can yield big changes in how the media portray—and how audiences understand—these issues.

A feature on gun violence from The Washington Post provides an excellent example of how reporters can go beyond criminal justice milestones like trials and arrests and capture the daily reality of a complex social issue—and its up-close impact on people's lives—in the absence of a traditional news peg. In this article, the Post documents what a single, typical day in the United States looks like in terms of gun-related trauma and fatalities. Using data and timestamps, they report on how many people were shot (113), died (103), and died by suicide, the most common cause of firearm deaths (63). They also provide snapshots of the people affected and the circumstances leading up to the shootings, such as a "poorly made drink" in a bar and a fight at a gas station, and include video of some of the grueling physical therapy that survivors of gun violence must endure. Overall, the coverage helps to make the issue more tangible for readers and demonstrates that it is an ongoing social issue much broader than mass shootings, which are overrepresented in coverage.

5. Use precise language to describe the issue.

The words reporters use can either help or hinder audiences from understanding an issue's complexity, what factors contribute to it, and how we can address and prevent it. Although there is no single word or description that works in every instance, there are guidelines that journalists can follow to avoid compounding harm by inadvertently reproducing harmful dominant narratives.

Take sexual violence, for example. Journalists should be sure to avoid conflating sex with rape or other forms of violence. But how much detail helps us better understand assault, and what types of details could be counterproductive and lead to sensationalism or voyeurism? On one hand, journalists should avoid sanitized, euphemistic language that may minimize violence; on the other hand, it's important to ensure that language is not overly graphic or salacious or implies consent.

Descriptions of people who commit harm must strike a delicate balance between humanizing the perpetrator and exonerating them. Portraying a person who commits assault as a "monster" may make it harder for people to recognize warning signs for abuse within their own families and social circles. It is important for news audiences to understand that most acts of sexual violence occur between people who already know each other.

Similarly, descriptions of assault survivors must strive for balance. Is it important to avoid portraying victims as powerless or weak. However, many survivors also reject exterior labels of being "strong" or "brave," as it may feel that they are being forced to be inspirational for others, rather than having the space needed to grieve and heal from their trauma. No two survivors are alike, so it's important to talk with your sources about what language resonates with them. Journalists have a difficult job humanizing someone who has experienced violence without revealing details that might put that person at risk or invade their privacy. Identifying ways to do this well is important otherwise stories will have abundant details about the person accused of causing the harm and little about who was harmed.

For a list of words and phrases to avoid, along with alternative language suggestions and descriptions of why they matter, check out this resource from the National Sexual Violence Resource Center.

6. **Use data—including disaggregated data—to illustrate who is affected and how widespread the issue is.**

Numbers are important because they help audiences understand the scope of the problem; however, data should be used selectively to prevent creating confusion. One technique journalists can use to make large or complex numbers easier for audiences to digest is "social math". This involves breaking down numbers by place or time or using creative comparisons to help readers better relate. For instance, instead of providing readers solely with a raw statistic on the number of people who are physically abused, raped or stalked by their partners each year, reporters can make the statistic more accessible by providing an easier-to-understand comparison, e.g. "12.7 million survivors is roughly equal to the populations of New York City and Los Angeles combined."

Another example comes from The Justice Policy Institute of Nevada and the ACLU: The groups once teamed up to create a campaign highlighting the need for juvenile justice reform. They developed a series of infographics showing how spending to lock up youth dwarfed funds dedicated to critical social investments such as education. The side-by-side comparisons (a 16-to-1 difference in funds, at the time of the campaign) helped to put each budget item into perspective.

Additionally, when presenting data on inequities, it is critical to include the systemic causes for inequities; otherwise, news audiences may inadvertently blame those who are most impacted. For example, it's important for readers to understand how government-sanctioned redlining (a discriminatory practice in which low-income and communities of color are excluded from receiving services and investments like home loans), dating back to the 1930s, played a role in creating a disproportionate number of Black people who are homeless. If news audiences are given data on homelessness, without being educated on the historical policies and practices that underlie those numbers, they may not understand who should be held accountable. Finally, reporters should diversify their data sources. For example, in reporting on violence trends, many reporters turn to law enforcement or the courts. However, community organizations and public health agencies can often provide data and can include information on health and community impacts.

7. **Expand sources to include underrepresented voices.**

Across many public health and social justice issues from police violence to reproductive justice and more, the voices of people who are most directly affected tend to be included in the role of victim but underrepresented or absent as experts in community life and solutions. When selecting sources, consider

people beyond academic experts. Ask what communities are being harmed, what solutions they are already creating, and whether they have a voice in coverage. Seek to include the voices of those most impacted not just from isolated acts, but with a landscape view that might include how they are organizing with others to prevent these harms.

Consider these two examples:

- **Abortion:** Abortion providers and people who have abortions remain underrepresented in news coverage. Journalists must work to correct this imbalance. Hearing from the people whose lives are most directly affected can help to reduce stigma surrounding abortion care, as well as reflect and do justice to the breadth of experiences people have. To do so, journalists can go beyond national efforts and amplify the work of local and state-based organizations and individuals working on abortion rights, reproductive justice, and otherwise supporting people who access abortion care, e.g. through local abortion funds.

- **COVID:** People who have experienced COVID — and the communities that have been hit hardest — are crucial components of news stories. Newsrooms can create checklists, questions, and that explicitly seek to ensure that reporting is thorough, accurate, and balanced. For example, the Maynard Institute for Journalism Education offers trainings and tools that help bring conversations about racism and racial justice into the newsroom. Virtual reporter roundtable events can show how Black leaders are tackling the dual crises of COVID and racism and creating solutions. Early in the pandemic, one roundtable, *a Black-led COVID recovery,* connected reporters to Black leaders engaged in youth organizing for Black Lives and defunding the police in Vallejo, teachers dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline, Black community development leaders working to stave off the next foreclosure crises in Richmond, bus drivers organizing to protect all residents and essential workers, Black entrepreneurs trying to keep locally-owned businesses led by Black residents afloat during the state of emergency, and formerly incarcerated people fighting to eliminate discrimination against inmates released during COVID.

8. **Be transparent about your sources' background, particularly if they have ties to industry or other groups with a financial stake in a particular outcome.**

Too often, to remain neutral, journalists produce stories that contain he said-she said reporting, giving equal weight to sources that have unequal social power. Although it is important to include multiple sources, it is just as important to help readers understand each source's connection to the issue and who stands to benefit — or be harmed. A prime example comes from the soda industry's ongoing attempts to block public health legislation to tax sugary drinks as part of a larger effort to reduce rates of diabetes, heart disease, and other nutrition-related issues. One common industry tactic is to fund opposition front groups that appear to be grassroots organizations. However, research from Berkeley Media Studies Group has repeatedly found that news coverage quoting members of these groups fails to report their financial ties to industry, giving the false impression of community-led opposition. To serve readers well, reporters must follow the money and bring financial transparency to their audiences.

9. **Examine connections across issues and beats.**

Doing so can help audiences see the bigger picture, including how the problem impacts communities' (physical and fiscal) health. Although mainstream news outlets traditionally divide coverage by beat, every issue has health implications, economic implications, environmental implications, etc. For example, research has found that mass shootings are often linked to misogyny and domestic violence. Elevating such connections can help the public and policymakers better envision ways to prevent harm. In the case of gun violence prevention, some jurisdictions have already developed lists that help to keep firearms out of the hands of known domestic abusers.

10. **Be explicit about who is benefiting from (current and historical) structural racism and other forms of oppression that contribute to the issue disproportionately affecting other groups.**

Many public health issues exist across all communities and cross racial, ethnic, and class lines. However, across almost every public health issue, data confirm that there are inequities based on racial, ethnic, class, gender and sexuality, immigration-status, disability status, and other aspects of our identity. As such, news stories need to reflect this. When investigating information about prevalence across different populations, keep in mind that many mainstream sources may not ask about or include those who are most harmed by these inequities in their research questions and methods. Talk with sources from organizations that represent the group that you are covering to get firsthand accounts when data are lacking (or to further support existing data).

Regarding reproductive health and rights, for example, low-income women and women of color are less likely to have access to affordable contraception, more likely to get abortions, and, thus, more heavily impacted by policies restricting the procedure. Coverage should make those inequities visible so that readers understand what is at stake for communities of color and working-class or high-poverty areas. Journalists should also help educate readers about the reproductive justice movement's history and framework. Women of color leaders in the 1990s pushed the field beyond pro-choice ideology (historically focused solely on abortion access) to approach reproductive rights as inextricably linked with race, class, and gender equity.

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Go in-depth: Examples & Tips

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

By: Heather Gehlert and Lori Dorfman, Berkeley Media Studies Group, and Makani Themba, Higher Ground Change Strategies

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."

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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.

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Go in-depth: Examples & Tips

Open Sesame:
Going behind the scenes of Sesame Street to understand narrative infrastructure

By: Heather Gehlert, Berkeley Media Studies Group

Immortal. Aspirational. Bigger than ourselves. Those are a few of the words that Sesame Street's creators and viewers have used to describe the groundbreaking and almost universally beloved show — a program that illustrates what it means to build narrative power with stories that advance dignity and belonging.

When it debuted in November 1969, Sesame Street was the first educational TV program to compete with commercial shows for its audience. Its founders set out to give children the tools they needed to create the kind of world they want to live in. Before Sesame Street, what children learned from TV was of little value. "Every child in America was singing beer commercials," said Joan Cooney, the show's earliest visionary, in *Street Gang*, a documentary on Sesame Street's origins. She wondered: Could TV be used to educate, instead of just sell? Could commercial techniques be used to prepare kids for school and teach them important life lessons?

Over half a century later, we have ample evidence to prove what Cooney believed to be true all along, and the answer to her questions is a resounding "yes." Yes, TV can have social value. Yes, it can be used to hook children on the alphabet instead of alcohol. Yes, it can make learning fun, while helping children to navigate complex issues, like racial identity, death, and self-doubt.

Sesame Street — whose name derives from the phrase "open sesame," suggesting unrestricted access to a place where adventures can happen — transformed the television landscape and created educational opportunities for kids from all racial and socio-economic backgrounds. And while on it's own, one show cannot dismantle the barriers to education that create racial inequities, it can be part of the narrative infrastructure that builds racial equity.

"At the kernel of our being, we're not sure what we are or what we can be," said music composer Joe Raposo. "We know there's potential and the realization to accept ourselves, to know that we can become something that perhaps we never dreamed we could be. That's what Sesame Street is about."
The program's widespread appeal and success in shaping the worldview of entire generations of young people make it an excellent case example of how abstract concepts like narrative infrastructure and power manifest in real-world settings, like on the stage and in the writing room of this pioneering children's show.

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37

Sesame Street had all the components required to support an infrastructure that could build and reinforce progressive narratives, starting with well-defined goals and a clear target audience. The show's creators wanted to produce fun, entertaining, educational programming to help better prepare inner-city children, especially Black children, for kindergarten. The idea was to close the gap kids of color and low-income children faced when they started school while benefiting all youngsters.

"There is no question the people who control the system read, and the people who make it in the system read," Cooney said.

After conducting a four-month feasibility study in the mid-1960s, Cooney found that kids aged 3 to 5 watched TV one half of their waking time. The only larger category was sleep. If they're going to watch so much TV, she and show producers thought, why not find out what they like to watch and find out what would be good for them to watch, and then put the two together? That's exactly what they did, and Sesame Street was born.

Funded by the federal government, Sesame Street operated on a robust initial budget of $8 million — that's roughly equivalent to $60 million in 2022 — and had tremendous reach: More than 180 stations carried the show. As part of the Children's Television Workshop, Sesame Street writers collaborated with educators to create a curriculum that taught children their numbers and letters, part-whole relationships, and a range of other core concepts. At the same time, the diverse, mixed-race cast demonstrated values like community and inclusion and tackled important social concepts, showing that people from all backgrounds deserve respect; for example, the program portrayed blue-collar jobs like a bus driver with as much prestige as white-collar career paths like dentistry.

"When you're growing up and you don't see yourself in the media, then you get the feeling that you don't exist," said Sonia Manzano, who played Maria on the show. "And that's when you start feeling like you're not part of this society or this culture."

Sesame Street provided positive roles for Latinx and Black actors at a time when many acting roles, such as gang members, fueled negative stereotypes. The show not only embraced inclusion through its cast but also through its set. Modeled after a street in Harem, Sesame Street reflected the real-life energy one might find in an urban neighborhood, where the road itself acts as a playground of sorts.
To further build narrative infrastructure, Sesame Street's staff hired a community outreach worker named Evelyn Davis who contacted churches, schools, child care centers, and YMCAs to get the word out. Additionally, actors toured during their first year for Sesame Street Live, which actor Matt Robinson described as like "Woodstock for kids."

Even adults embraced the show. Sesame Street's musical guests, which included talents ranging from Loretta Lynn to James Taylor to Dizzy Gillespie, appealed to all ages. The show's large audience was also a credit to its writers, who often used satire and other forms of humor to engage older viewers. That tactic was as strategic as it was enjoyable: The producers knew from focus groups that children retained Sesame Street's lessons better if they could discuss what they were learning with a parent or guardian.
Still, the show was not without opposition. It came of age during the Civil Rights movement and Vietnam War, when the country was already deeply divided. In Mississippi, for example, some viewers disliked the number of Black performers on the show, and the Offices of the Mississippi Authority for Educational Television — a million-dollar public TV facility, located in a white, affluent suburb of Jackson — wouldn't carry Sesame Street until advocates forced the issue. Not all educators embraced it either; some thought the program was loud and overstimulating.

Despite such hurdles, Sesame Street quickly became a tremendous success. It's as if "the world had been waiting for it," Cooney said of its launch.

Sesame Street remains popular today, with another generation of children learning enumeration from The Count, contemplating race with songs like "It's Not Easy Being Green," gathering wisdom on how to deal with difficult people from Oscar the Grouch, and, in general, daring to dream.

"I may be small, but I am somebody. I can change the world. …" Rev. Jesse Jackson once said before a crowd of tiny smiles on the show. "Beautiful children will grow up and make the whole world beautiful." Decades later, that sentiment still rings true. And if Joan Cooney is right, the show's core messages will endure 200 years from now. "It's sort of a form of immortality," she said. "Ernie will live forever."

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Go in-depth: Examples & Tips

Indigenous victories: What decades-long endeavors to create inclusive policies and stories can tell us about narrative power

By: Heather Gehlert, Berkeley Media Studies Group

Narrative power often feels abstract because the social change it produces can take years — even decades — and the path toward progress is rarely linear. However, several recent, groundbreaking victories among Indigenous rights groups show that long-term narrative power-building and persistence can yield major advances in equity and inclusion.

For example, Native Americans protested the Keystone XL pipeline expansion for more than a decade before they won the health and civil rights battle — a monumental success that involved numerous lawsuits and spanned three presidential administrations. Similarly, 12 years passed between the first proposed idea for honoring Indigenous Peoples Day and South Dakota's decision to swap out Columbus Day for the new designation, and the holiday did not gain federal recognition for an additional 32 years, in 2021.

In yet another example of endurance, it took more than 50 years after the National Congress of American Indians launched a campaign to address offensive stereotypes of Indigenous peoples in the media before the Washington Football Team announced it would drop its R-word moniker, change its mascot, and ban fans from showing up to games wearing Native American-inspired headdresses or face paint.
The web of narrative power and infrastructure that underlies each of these victories is complex, but looking at them together can help bring the kaleidoscope into focus. Whether the issue at hand relates to a policy (e.g. land and water rights), cultural visibility (such as national celebrations), overt prejudice (through language and symbols) or something else, progress requires sustained attention across multiple spheres; it means changing laws and policies to shape people's actions; shifting how people think and talk about an issue; and making sure an issue is visible in the first place.

Power-building also entails using prior successes to buoy future ones. For instance, the campaign that led to the Washington Football franchise name change was not a stand-alone win. Rather, it gained momentum from previous victories, such as the Portland Oregonian's 1992 decision to no longer use the R-word; a 2002 resolution among dozens of Minnesota colleges and universities against the use of discriminatory names, logos, and mascots; and the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office's 2014 decision to deny a company's request to trademark and sell snacks using the R-word.

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Besides battling stereotypes, Native American activists have faced many hurdles of exclusion and omission; however, that is beginning to change. Not only are athletic teams, educational institutions, and news outlets rethinking their language regarding Indigenous culture, but entertainment media are finally increasing Native American representation. In 2021, for example, four young Native actors became central characters in a show called Reservation Dogs. This is a major milestone, considering fewer than 1% of primetime TV and film characters are Native American. What's more, the comedy program's directors and writers are all Indigenous.

"Indigenous people are involved at every level," Smithsonian Magazine reported. "It's a genuine, one-of-a-kind breakthrough."

This kind of show, which features authentic storytelling, will no doubt strengthen the infrastructure that supports broader narrative and social change. And, when combined with other victories, it reveals the many facets of power that function together, as seeds of change, to advance a vision for society that includes, honors, and celebrates Native American values, contributions, and culture.