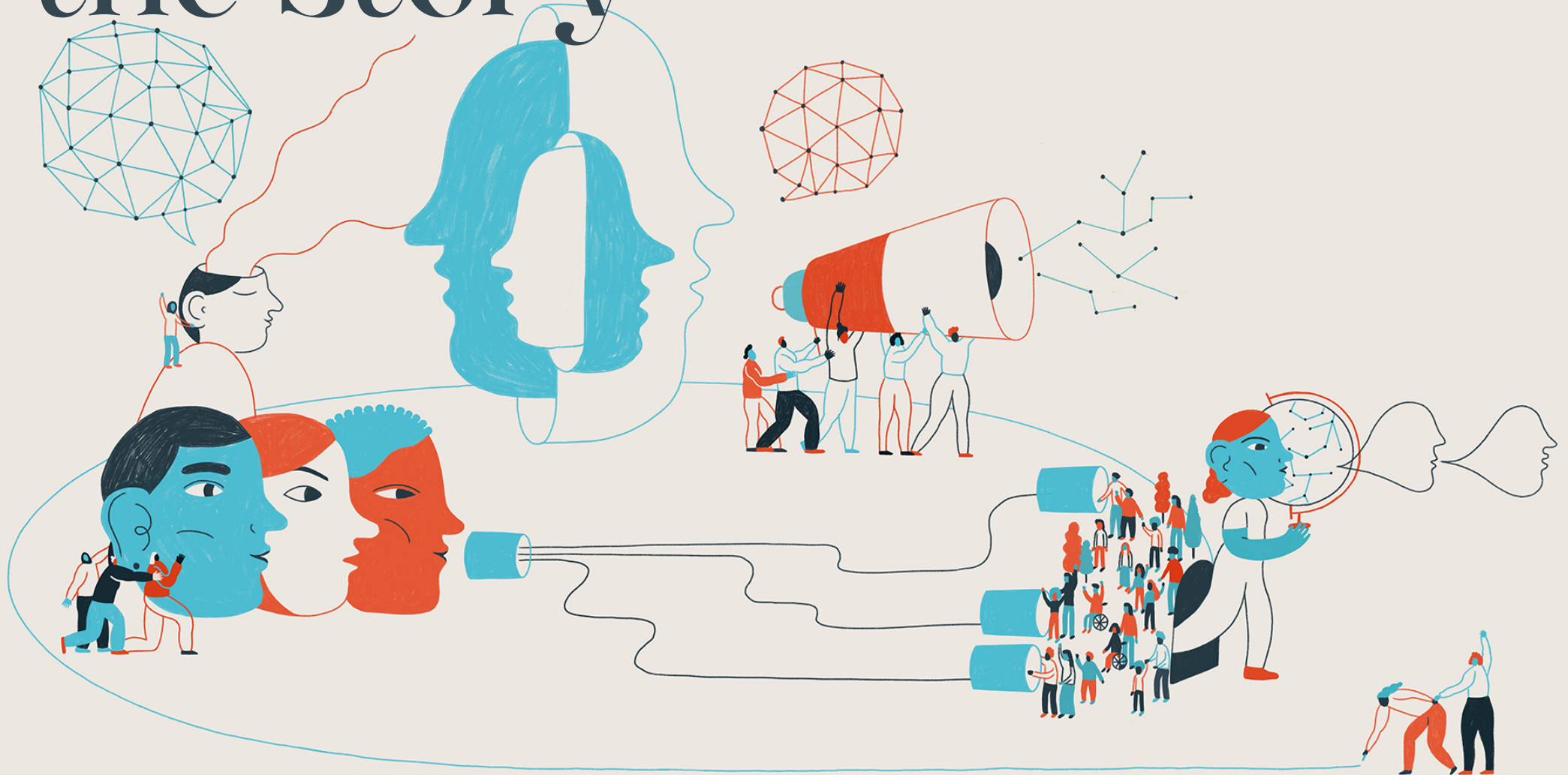


Let's change the story



Let's change the story. New narratives for social transformation

Ideas, reflections and practical advice
for coming up with new narratives

A compilation of the contents from the webinar series "Let's change the story," organized by Oxfam, Lafede.cat, Universitat Jaume I - Interuniversity Institute for Social Development and Peace (PROJECT UJI-B2019-13) and Quepo

April 26th - May 5th 2022

5 What are narratives all about?

- 6—Several definitions for the same concept
- 7—Why are they important for social transformation?
- 8—Frameworks, stories, storytelling and other close relatives

11 Narratives are power (and the other way around too)

- 12—Power is not just at the top
- 13—And there is no such thing as a single audience
- 14—The hidden power of narratives
- 15—Spotting the narratives that are winning the game
- 17—Laying the foundation for a successful narrative
- 17—The narrative dream produces disinformation

20 Using narratives to drive social change

- 21—Responses or proposals: Constructing narratives from other narratives... or out of nothing at all?
- 22—The big problem of captured narratives; and how to free them
- 24—What language(s) do transformative narratives speak?
- 26—Simple techniques for constructing new narratives
- 30—Seizing the Day: Joining Forces for Social Change
- 31—Top down or bottom up? The coexistence of activists and professionals
- 33—The transformative power of art: Creativity for the construction of new narratives
- 35—But does this work or not? Evaluating results

40 New narratives in the digital environment

- 41—From mass media to social media
- 41—When the internet was an alternative... and when did it stop being so?
- 42—Making a deal with the devil: Using social media to spread new narratives
- 43—The digital medium has its own narratives
- 45—A bunch of guys locked up in their rooms: The other digital divide

47 Epilogue: What's next? Ideas for moving forward

49 Webinar presenters and moderators

53 Links to contents

Introducción

«Let's change the story" was an online meeting of activists, academics and communication professionals to **discuss the construction of new narratives in response to the dominant discourses, in order to promote profound transformations in our societies.**

The conversations lasted about two hours each, and were held over six days, with twenty-two speakers and six moderators. Although the sessions followed a predetermined structure, the very dynamics of the conversation opened the door to blending topics, experiences and points of view, so that, within the same webinar, issues were addressed that had not been foreseen for that day - and the same concept would end up being raised in different sessions.

Consequently, we reorganized the content to connect related ideas. We grouped together the opinions participants offered on the same issue. We also combined theoretical concepts and the case studies that illustrate them. Instead of presenting a list of names and a list of isolated opinions, **we created a joint narrative that brings together the ideas and practices presented over the course of six days** of webinars.

Due to the collective nature of the content, at the end of each section we included a complete list of the people who contributed to that particular section. This system makes for more fluid reading, and reflects the idea of a collective narrative, which has been the basis for constructing this document.

The purpose of this document is not to build a theoretical corpus, but to clarify concepts, share real experiences and describe some practices that have proven to be effective. We are not interested in having a conceptual debate as much as in proffering an invitation to take action, because nowadays society is overexposed to all kinds of communicative stimuli, and narratives are more effective than ever in establishing a certain vision of reality, while wiping others off the map.

Much of the current battle for hegemony is being fought in the field of narratives, so we could not miss the opportunity to provide solid arguments with which to build a good defense and launch an effective counterattack. **Here's hoping that the ideas and reflections contained in these pages will contribute to deepening our understanding of the mechanisms that make it possible to construct new narratives, in order to build a fairer and less unequal world.**

What are narratives all about?



This first chapter defines the concept of "narratives," underlines its importance in an information society and distinguishes it from others with which it is often associated (and confused)

Several definitions for the same concept

A narrative is the way a society thinks and feels about an issue.

A narrative is like a mosaic. As a whole, it shows us a picture. Now, if a mosaic comprises hundreds of different small pebbles that together make up an image, in terms of narratives, those pebbles are the stories.

The new narratives propose an alternative reading of reality and subvert the symbolic representation of the dominant narrative. They confer a different meaning to the elements that had, until that point, been used in constructing the hegemonic narrative. They offer context and interdependence, and propose a rights-based approach, from an ecosocial, feminist and global South perspective.

Narratives are symbolic representations of reality that lead to the execution of direct actions, within a given structure.

The hegemonic or dominant narrative emerges from the structures of power, it reinforces the current status quo and denies civil society space for representation. It limits the vision of a more just world and defines alternatives as «utopian» or «unattainable».

«Narrative» is actually the same as «account»¹, which is also composed of multiple elements (short stories). However, the consensus nowadays is around the word «narrative», and not the term «story».

Narratives are not restricted to the messages we receive from the media, social networks or cultural products. Human beings are narrative beings. We tell stories with everything we do. The structure of an organization or an act of civil disobedience also projects a narrative. Everything communicates.

1. A report or description of an event or experience.

Why are they important for social transformation?

Muriel Rukeyser said that "the universe is made of stories, not atoms." Stories enable us to explain who we are and what we are, but they also describe and represent the circumstances in which we live.

This representation of reality includes the structures and beliefs that sustain it, often in a very subtle way. Structures determine who has access to power and who does not, while beliefs drive us in one direction or another to take action.

Hegemonic power aspires to control both beliefs and structures. Two elements that are constructed from narratives. Therefore, in order to change power, it is essential to change narratives as well. Because, without changing the narrative, neither beliefs nor structures change.

The concrete form that a story takes is directly linked to our thinking, to our values. And the actions we take proceed from the values in our heads.

There is a direct relationship between narratives, beliefs and actions. Therefore, narratives are key for agents of change, for activism. The dissemination and implementation of a particular narrative shapes and determines people's belief that they are able to achieve political goals.

Narratives shape reality in an intentional and premeditated way. Depending on our view of reality, we take for granted values and beliefs that drive us to take particular actions. To change the way we act, therefore, new narratives must be established.

The phrase "we must take care of nature," at first glance a positive message, actually raises two deeper ideas: That nature is something external, that it is outside of us; and that we are able to take care of it or not to take care of it, so we are above it. The inference is that we dominate it and can control everything that happens to it, for good or evil. The decision to take care of her is therefore optional.

On the other hand, the phrase "we are nature" implies that we are on the same level, that our future depends intimately on a healthy environment. Caring for nature then ceases to be an option, because not to do so would result in the end of the human species. In this case, the move to action is obligatory.

Frames, stories, storytelling and other close relatives

When talking about narratives, other terms such as «frames» «storytelling» or "stories" are often used as synonyms in certain contexts. Although all these terms point in the same direction, they express different nuances that should not be confused.

Stories are the elements that build a narrative. Whether they describe real events or just fiction, they usually follow the classic structure, namely exposition, climax and resolution; besides, they must match the values and beliefs that the narrative seeks to reinforce. A story does not have to contain all the elements that a particular narrative intends to highlight; in the end, the sum of different stories builds the comprehensive vision proposed by the narrative.

Storytelling is the use of stories to connect with audiences and deliver a message. Instead of lecturing or explaining, it relies on a plot and characters to capture the imagination of the audience and facilitate their emotional identification with values or beliefs. Storytelling elicits more empathy in the audience, and is more entertaining and easier to remember than a speech, a lecture, or an essay.

Frames focus on certain themes, while at the same time they leave others out. When interpreting the representation of a particular topic, frameworks activate and reinforce specific mental schemas. They are a part of the cognitive structures we use for understanding and interpreting the world; furthermore, we reproduce them when we shape a discourse in a certain way.

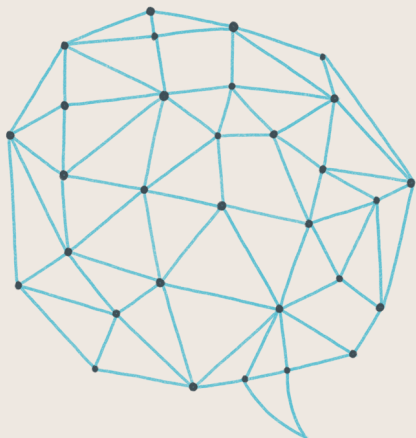
Stories are based on **storytelling**. **Narratives** contain a multitude of **stories** that share certain values. Whereas **frames** determine what elements are included or left out of the stories—and, consequently, the narrative.

In 2009, in the midst of the financial and mortgage crisis, the PAH (Spanish acronym), or Platform of People Affected by Mortgages, emerged in Spain, with the goal of helping the thousands of people who were losing their homes because they could not pay their loans. People who sought out the PAH tended to exhibit a sense of guilt and shame. The dominant narrative was that they had "bitten off more than they could chew," and that their situation was due to excessive greed, to wanting to live beyond their means. They had borrowed money knowing they would not be able to pay it back, and the market simply set things right.

The PAH decided to change the narrative because it did not match the actual circumstances as observed. The banks had granted high-risk mortgage loans, bypassing their own security protocols. They had sold financial products to people who did not know what they were buying. They had granted mortgages for 110 percent the price of the house. They had disregarded the credit standing of mortgage applicants. If anything, if anyone had "bitten off more than they could chew" it had been the banks; it was the financial system that had sinned and been greedy.

Through the hundreds of stories that the PAH was able to collect and share with the public, those evicted ceased to be represented as "irresponsible" and came to be seen as victims of a financial system that only thought about multiplying its profits. These people were no longer the villains, but the victims. This change in narrative succeeded in creating a widespread feeling of rejection toward the banking sector, and, in combination with other factors, this would eventually lead to the 15-M protests of 2011. However, in 2022, the PAH recognized that many of the people who seek help today still bear that feeling of guilt. Consolidating a new narrative is not a short or medium-term process, neither can it depend on a single agent of change, rather, it must involve different organizations working toward a common goal, such as a structural reform of the financial system, in this case.





Contributors to this section...

Eloísa Nos Aldás
(UJI Professor)

Lisa VeneKlasen
(JASS)

Mariana Mendoza
(Center for Story-based
Strategy)

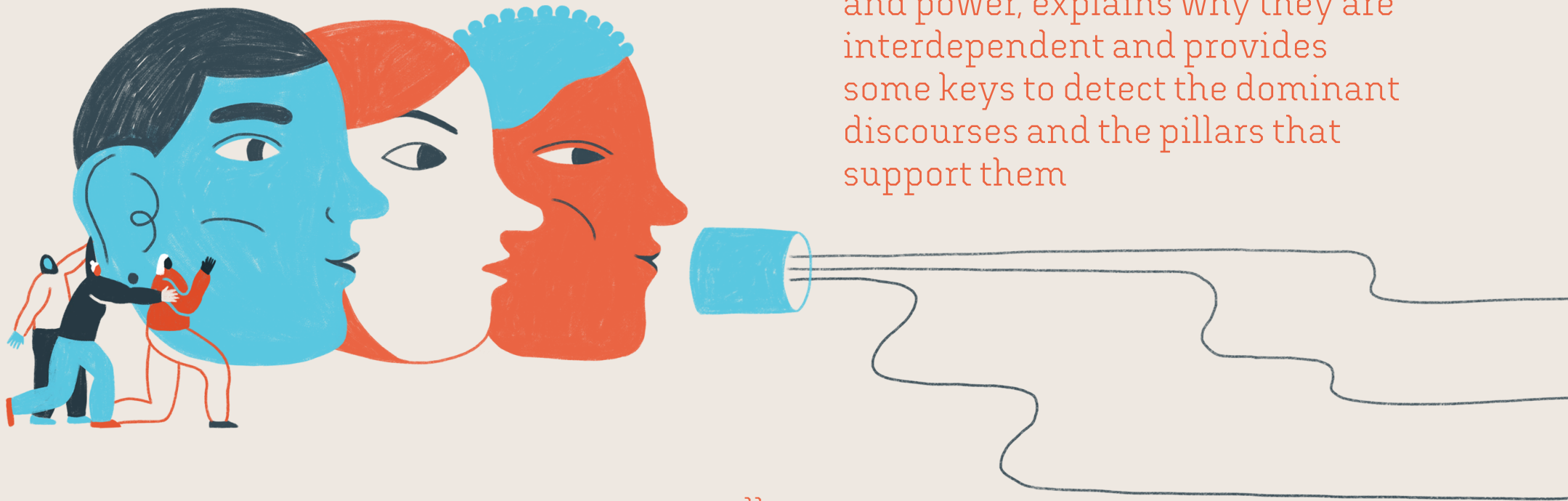
Cris Lagunas
(Center for Story-based
Strategy)

**Alejandro
Gamboa-Hoyos**
(Political Scientist,
University of Antioquia)

Alejandra Alayza
(Oxfam Perú)



Narratives are power (and the other way around too)



This second part links narratives and power, explains why they are interdependent and provides some keys to detect the dominant discourses and the pillars that support them

Power is not only at the top

Power uses narratives to entrench its structures and beliefs, while it marginalizes any alternative interpretation of reality. To change power, therefore, it is essential to change narratives.

Narratives connect the real and the symbolic. This connection between the real and the symbolic is fundamental to any social transformation, because power is based on structures and beliefs that feed simultaneously on both spheres.

If power manifests itself in both a real and a symbolic dimension, its expression is not limited to institutions alone. Power is expressed at "four different levels," working in different spheres. Within the same society, however, the four levels of power do not always fit into the same hegemonic vision and, on occasion, they conflict with each other. The four levels of power are as follows:

Visible power: The decisions arrived at by governments, laws, courts.

Hidden power: Banks, oligarchs, churches and other groups that set the political agenda from a position of privilege. Organized crime must also be taken into account; a power that hides in the shadows.

Invisible power: A dimension that has less to do with the power that some have and others lack, and more to do with the values and beliefs that permeate a society as a whole.

Systemic power: Genetic codes, systemic arrangements. The great structures that shape a society, such as capitalism or patriarchy, and justify a scheme of the dominant and the dominated.

Narratives are the mobilization of two levels of power: the invisible and the systemic. Therein lies the genetic code of power; the values we take for granted and the assumptions we accept as valid without even asking ourselves if they are plausible or if they respond to specific interests. Because of their capacity to fix the beliefs and values of a society or institutions, narratives have the power to dictate the messages and values that are disseminated, to the point of becoming part of the laws of a country.

And there is no such thing as a single audience

There is no such thing as a general public. People have different opinions, interests, values, prejudices and conditioning factors that determine the way a message is received. In terms of the audience, think beyond profiles, niches and age groups - typical marketing concepts - it is much more practical to classify the audience into three main groups:

- 1** **Supporters** (those «in favor»): People who, no matter what happens, are going to agree with the values that are defended in a new narrative. Politically motivated people who identify with progressive causes.
- 2** **Detractors** (those «against»): People who, no matter what happens, are going to be against the values and arguments put forward by the narrative. Politically motivated people who identify with reactionary positions, close to the extreme right.
- 3** **The persuadable center:** People with an ambivalent, and sometimes contradictory, political vision of the world around them. They might support both progressive and conservative causes, depending on their interests and the messages they receive that connect with their values.

The number of people in the persuadable center outnumbers the sum of supporters and detractors. By a considerable margin. Therefore, any attempt to transform a narrative that conditions society as a whole must have significant support within that group. In other words, effort should not go into trying to reach the supporters -because they are already convinced- nor the detractors -because it will be impossible to convince them-, instead, to try to connect with the persuadable center. The objective should be to get this large intermediate group to begin to embrace and transmit the values that are transmitted from the new narrative. When this happens, the door to true transformation opens.

It should be kept in mind that, within the persuadable center, there are people who view themselves as left, right and center. Therefore, it is not very efficient to classify the persuadable center based on the ideologies of the political spectrum. A narrative that defines itself as "left-wing" may scare away the persuadable center that identifies with more conservative positions. Rather than defining transformative values as "left-wing," they should be presented in an attractive and coherent way, so that different audiences can feel that they are their own, or close to their own, regardless of political affiliations.

It is more appropriate to address the persuasive center based on the Cartesian axis "more power - less power." In our societies, power lies in the hands of a very small percentage of the population, so appealing to those who do not have it will resonate much more than talking about left and right. But we must never forget that there is no magic word to reach all audiences.

The hidden power of narratives

By disseminating and reinforcing beliefs and structures, stories have the power to perform three crucial functions:

Describe: They explain things that have happened. Which stories are they telling me? And, which are sidelined or excluded?

Persuade: Narratives are able to convince the audience. The way the issue is framed determines the solution. How does the story condition the way we see reality?

Establish: Narratives define a worldview, an identity and what is assumed to be "common sense." What things are taken for granted and are invisible to the naked eye?

A good narrative ought to perform all three functions at the same time. The most visible layer will be the descriptive one, as it names and describes the facts we see around us. But, based on the description, first, it should be easy to deduce solutions to the problem and then, at a deeper level, to convey an overview of social structures.

Spotting the narratives that are winning the game

Detecting and analyzing the dominant narratives involves an in-depth look into the hegemonic power itself, and vice versa, because the keys to power lie behind the stories.

Since power is expressed on four different levels (see beginning of this chapter), strategies to decipher dominant narratives must also act at several levels at the same time.

A basic approach for detecting dominant narratives and resisting their influence is available to us. This strategy starts by analyzing what we can see: The messages and the stories (the visible power). Next, we need to ask ourselves whose interests are served by those messages (the hidden power). And finally, we identify the values, visions and paradigms they uphold (unmasking the invisible and systemic power).

However, there is no single approach – and no approach is infallible – for detecting the narratives we want to change. Initially, observation, intuition and self-knowledge are useful strategies to guide research work. In a second phase, we should consider engaging professionals (journalists, semioticians, communication experts) to get a deeper reading of each narrative and propose qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis. These methods of analysis include the study of big data and thick data, standardized surveys, personalized interviews, discourse content analysis or focus group observation, to name a few examples.

When analyzing the dominant narratives and figuring out the keys that sustain them, it is very useful to define the following five elements of a narrative. Detecting and identifying these five elements is also of great help in constructing a new narrative, because they include many of the fundamental ingredients.

- 1 Conflict.** How is the problem the narrative is talking about being framed? What is the conflict, or who is involved? What is at stake?
- 2 Characters.** Who is telling the story? Are those involved telling the story themselves, or do other people have a voice?
- 3 Imagery.** Are there powerful symbols or metaphors? Are there concrete examples that personalize the story that we are being told? What powerful images does it put in our heads?
- 4 Foreshadowing.** What vision of the future does the story offer us? What is the "successful" solution to the problem that is presented to us?
- 5 Underlying assumptions.** What prior beliefs are required to consider the story true? What values are behind it?

The underlying assumptions are critical to analyzing any narrative. **One of the most important questions we must ask ourselves in order to understand the mechanisms behind a narrative is: What assumptions or speculation do we have to believe first, in order to consider this story to be true? As soon as we answer this, we will discover the essence of the narrative and the values it is instilling in society as a whole or in the target group.**

The Catalan Ministry of Education has been promoting sex-ed in high schools for years. Then a new generation of educators arrived in the classrooms, and spotted right away that the narrative did not match the real needs of the students. The teachers first analyzed the situation by direct observation, spoke with the young people, and looked at data and surveys of adolescent sexual practices.

When they detected a number of inconsistencies, such as girls saying they masturbated others instead of themselves, or an eleven-year-old boy referring to his penis as his "reproductive apparatus," they discovered that sex education was based on fear and risk. Issues such as the possibility of getting pregnant or sexually transmitted diseases were emphasized, and the central component, pleasure, was not discussed. In addition, a heterosexual vision based on normative bodies was reinforced and, when LGBTBI relationships were addressed, it was always done from the perspective of violence prevention (LGBTBIphobia); an important topic, but one that cannot be the central axis of sex education for an LGBTBI person.



They also observed that the same discourse - on masturbation, for example - had a different impact on boys than on girls. The same discourse launched in an unequal environment is also perceived unequally. So, the educators decided something that might seem strange at first glance, but it actually allowed the girls to express themselves more freely and sincerely: They segregated the classes by gender..

In the boys' group, macho complicity was established right away, like bragging about the number of "conquests." The trainers thought about how they could change this macho dynamic in the boys' class, to make room for a much more honest discussion of sexuality, free of equivocation.

The solution was to use models; a key aspect in any narrative. And the closest models available to the boys were the educators themselves. The trainer in charge of the boys' group was trans, but had decided to hide his status in order to be accepted by the group. When he realized that hiding his condition was reinforcing everything he wanted to avoid, he decided to open up with total transparency. At that point the atmosphere changed. He could talk about the anatomy of a vulva because he had one. From that moment on, boys began to express their doubts and fears much more freely, without fear of being judged. The moment a well-regarded reference person broke with the macho narrative, many boys in the class felt that they could do the same and show their vulnerable side.

Close models-persons, who are able to convey a message and values just by sharing their own daily lives, are of transcendental importance when it comes to constructing new narratives.

Laying the foundation for a successful narrative

The fundamental ingredient of a narrative has nothing to do with being true, the facts it describes or the actual circumstances. The key to a narrative lies in sense, in meaning. Narratives are not about truth and lies; they are about meaning.

To be effective, a narrative has to give meaning to the facts we see around us. It has to draw a line connecting the scattered dots we see in our daily lives that we struggle to make sense of. If narrative is able to connect those isolated dots that we wonder about, regardless of whether the line it draws is true or false, then it has the potential to take root in society and become consolidated.

The narrative dream produces disinformation.

What happens when a narrative intentionally offers a view of reality that might "make sense" but in the end is essentially false? Here we enter the realm of disinformation.

Disinformation - fake news - is able to give meaning to the facts, which are a source of disquieting to the audience. The stories in a disinformation campaign need a certain "logic," they should sound reasonable, seem sensible. There is only one problem: They are false. Even if they resonate with us.

Migration is a recurring theme in disinformation-based strategies. In Spain, one-third (1/3) of the news published on migrations has been detected as borderline disinformation. Despite the fallacy in statements like, "migrants are violent," or "they remove crucifixes from classrooms," these messages are used to justify things that are not going well in society: "What is not working is the fault of massive immigration." In a context where there is growing inequality and job insecurity, fake news about migration seems to make sense, because it offers an explanation for the loss of purchasing power of the middle and lower classes. Never mind the outright falsehood, they offer an explanation to explain the circumstances, and give meaning to people's discomfort. Crises are an opportunity to change power structures, but the extreme right also knows how to use them to reinforce existing power structures through disinformation. The growth of inequality in Spain should have stoked progressive movements - and it has - but it has also boosted the growth of the extreme right. Currently, anti-migration discourse in Spain has crept onto the political agenda and into government institutions because of the spread of narratives based on misinformation.

Addressing the problem of disinformation usually involves dealing with two very different approaches; This debate also carries over into the construction of new narratives (see next chapter). The following are the two strategies for combating disinformation:

Replication. Starting with false messages to build a response that neutralizes and dismantles them. For instance, when a false tweet is published associating migration and the rise in crime, the response would be to send another tweet with similar language and references that demonstrate that the data is false.

Alternative. Send a message with values that are opposite to those disseminated by the fake news, but without mentioning it or using the same language or the same forms. The idea is to get out of the mental framework that the fake news wants to create. In the previous example, it could be to talk about the positive values associated with the arrival of migrants, without mentioning crime.



In the specific case of the fight against disinformation, against fake news, practical experience seems to point to the first option. Fighting fake news and data with their own weapons, dismantling their own arguments, is much more effective than to do so from a completely different starting point presenting an «alternative reality».

But beware: This strategy is valid when it comes to dismantling fake news, data that is false. When it comes to countering narratives, the evidence seems to point in the other direction. The mental framework must be broken

Disinformation and the game of replicas and counter-replicas has had a devastating effect on the democratic health of our societies: According to a recent study, 60 percent of the Spanish population does not trust any news media.

And when the media does not fulfill its social function, society cannot be considered fully democratic.

Contributors to this section...

Jethro Pettit
(Learning for Change)

Lisa VeneKlasen
(JASS)

Teo Pardo
(Feminist and Trans Activist)

María José Gascón Artigas
(Oxfam Intermón)

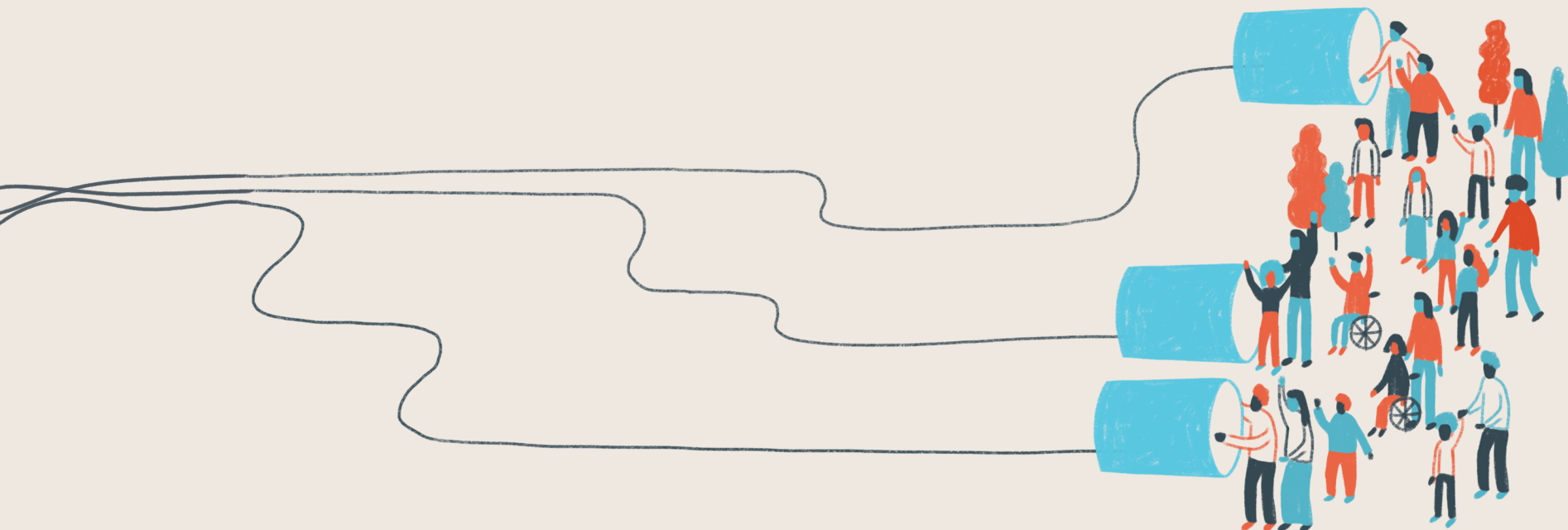
Lucía Mbomio
(Activist, Journalist and Writer)

Cris Lagunas
(Center for Story-based Strategy)

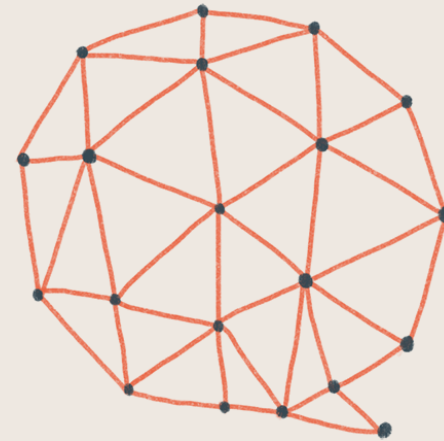
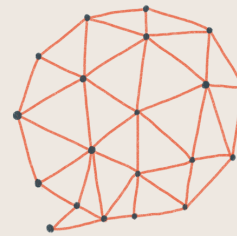
Patrick Reinsborough
(Narrative Strategist)

Mariana Mendoza
(Center for Story-based Strategy)

Natalia Diez
(Maldita Migración)



Using narratives to drive social change



This section discusses ways narratives can be used to transform power structures and hegemonic values, as well as techniques and strategies that facilitate the construction of alternative narratives

Responses or proposals: Constructing narratives from other narratives... or out of nothing at all?

The problem of focusing on a discourse based on replication is that it prevents us from talking about what we are. Replication is limited to dismantling the adversary's position, but does not include an alternative vision of the future; that is, with replication we do not build a new narrative. On the contrary, it is a rejoinder to the same beliefs and conjectures of the dominant narrative. We cannot always trail behind hegemony.

In many cases it is better to ignore negative narratives, so as not to repeat them, thus reinforcing the framework we are fighting.

In responding to the anti-immigration narrative, using phrases such as "migrating is not a crime" or "no immigrant is illegal" places the issue of migration in the realm of (i)legality and excludes other approaches, such as the human rights-based approach. In a new narrative, we need to make the sources and the stories our own.

However, when the most urgent objective is fighting a particular fake news story, it is necessary to replicate its language and terms to dismantle the arguments. But, then, new regenerative narratives (rege-narrative) must be constructed.

On social media, and when targeting a younger audience, the reappropriation of the references used by the dominant power has proven to be an effective strategy. Appropriating pop culture icons -such as a series (Breaking Bad to denounce fracking) or a character (Hello Kitty reconverted into a feminist heroine)- and transforming them with humor to express a completely groundbreaking message is a valid strategy. The subversion of the icons of hegemonic culture usually resonates with the public that is familiar with those kinds of references.

Creativity is fundamental when constructing new narratives. It is impossible to change hegemonic narratives without pushing the boundaries of the way we do things. Without creativity, we corner ourselves into easy-to-detect spaces, which those in power can easily criticize and slander.

The big problem of captured narratives; and how to free them

When a new narrative threatens the hegemonic narrative, it does not fall back on the ropes. First, it launches a strategy of frontal opposition against the transforming narrative based on denying all its arguments. When the new narrative is not robust enough, frontal opposition is enough for hegemonic power to deactivate it.

But when the new narrative succeeds in endowing the events that the public observes around it with meaning, and these new meanings resonate more strongly than the arguments put forward by the hegemonic power, the dominant discourse tries to capture it. **The strategies for dismantling a transformative narrative are diverse, but they all involve assimilating a part of the new narrative while, at the same time, deactivating those parts that pose a threat to hegemonic power.**

The reaction of the fossil fuel industry to data demonstrating climate change is a perfect example of the way hegemonic power assimilates a new narrative. When the idea of fossil fuel-driven "climate change" got traction, the industry denied all the arguments of the environmental movements with messages such as "climate is always changing" or that cycles of rising and falling temperatures are normal throughout history.

But when the scientific community as a whole stated that climate change was real, and that it is caused by human activity, the industry could no longer deny the evidence. It admitted that temperatures were rising, but quickly added some big "buts" to that first assertion. It counter-argued that the change was not as rapid as the environmentalists claimed and that there was plenty of time to make the transition to green energy, a transition that should be led by the industry itself, since it knew more about energy than anyone else. It also argued that, at present, fossil fuels were irreplaceable because green energies had not been sufficiently developed and were incapable of meeting current demand. Or that new technologies would be able to reduce the impact of fossil fuels. Or that, while coal is highly polluting, natural gas is practically harmless when it comes to global warming.

Industry subsumed the basic tenet of the new narrative - rising temperatures due to human activity - and expressed concern about the phenomenon, but added a number of arguments that put the brakes on the urgency of the green revolution. The industry declared itself, "concerned about the environment," and incorporated environmental messages into its narratives, this was called greenwashing. Postponing change became the new denialism. Currently, it is evident that, with its counterattack, the industry succeeded in disarming part of the environmental movement's demands, relativizing the urgency of the problem and downplaying the importance of climate change in the news agenda.

Faced with the fact that the environmentalist narrative was captured by the hegemonic power, the movement seems to be building a new narrative to overcome the previous one by creating a broader framework: Climate change is the symptom of a sick system, the financial capitalism embodied by Wall Street. To liberate the narrative again, the problem must be reframed: New villains must be revealed, and the characters in the story must be changed. It is also important to engage in alliances with new stakeholders, such as people working in agriculture, to get the narrative out through new stories and new channels. In some cases, the messenger is even more important than the message.

Finally, one should never rule out pedagogy of change. That is, explaining the evolution of the dominant narrative and how it has appropriated some key elements of the new one. By shining light on the fact that the dominant narrative has shed its skin, but not its objectives, the process of capture is partly deactivated.



Whoever dominates the system will want to dominate the narrative. It is important for the key players in the construction of a narrative to be aware of this phenomenon and be ready to act. Key players need to be brought together on the ground to think about concrete narratives that can bring about change.

What language(s) do transformative narratives speak?

The cooperation sector (the "third sector") and, to a lesser extent, social movements, have a certain obsession with the use of technical terminology that sounds strange to external audiences. Debates drag on about the use of one technical word over another, when, in fact, sector-specific terminology has no value in the construction of new narratives. **Communicating better involves using a much more universal language and translating technical terms into everyday, human language.** We are not all lawyers.

Organizations do not only communicate with the public; they also communicate with other organizations, as well as with the people involved in them. We can therefore speak of endocommunication (toward the members and allies of an organization) and exocommunication (toward external audiences). The language of endocommunication can involve more specific terminology, more specific references, more internal "winks" that will only be understood within the sector. On the other hand, outward communication has to rely on universal language that anyone can understand.

Defensores de la Democracia in Mexico set out to preserve the memory of the journalists murdered in the country (152 since 2000). They realized that these journalists were going to be remembered for their death – something that happened in just a few seconds – whereas a lifetime of work and dedication to the community was being overlooked. The group set out to change the narrative about the murders: They were going to talk about what they had done, and describe the context in which they worked; to memorialize them for their life, not their death.

They also realized that, contrary to what most people believed, the murdered journalists had not published articles about drug trafficking. Many of these journalists worked for independent news outlets and were dedicated to covering local news, such street conditions, or shopkeeper complaints. They had not been killed for telling the truth; they had been put to death for being the voice of a community against the established power in the area.

The first thing the group did was to create a repository of the works published by the murdered journalists, to preserve their memory. But they soon realized that the public was not going to enter a repository to read old articles from local media. Then they wondered what format would be the most effective to reach a broader public, outside journalism, people who had no particular interest in the subject. First, written formats were discarded for being too traditional and requiring an active attitude on the part of the receiver. The most obvious solution was to produce audiovisual content, but the video format was out of the question due to budget constraints. So they opted for the podcast, a format that was experiencing a boom in Latin America at that time: Cheaper, more accessible and easy to use, as well as entertaining, attractive and capable of telling complex stories.

The podcast was called Voces Silenciadas (Silenced Voices) and, from its very conception, the intention was to reach a large audience. That is why they worked particularly hard on producing the episodes: The voices, the sound effects, creating a setting that would catch the listener's interest, and immerse him/her in the environment of the murdered journalist. The languages, both spoken word and soundscape were direct and suggestive at the same time. At the same time, aware that in many of the communities where the journalists worked, access to technology was limited, Defensores de la Democracia partnered with the country's community radio stations, which play a fundamental role in communities far from the big cities. They offered the podcast to traditional community radio stations for broadcasting, to reach people through a simple transistor.

Adapting the format to the audience was a success. The podcast ended up reaching people outside of journalism who had bought into the dominant narrative. Voces Silenciadas has managed to change the perception that journalists had been killed "for meddling where they shouldn't," and that in reality they were "only" killed for doing their job; for doing work that made the powers-that-be uncomfortable and showed that the country still has a long way to go in terms of civil rights.

The formats for disseminating a narrative, whether it is video, podcast, written news, memes, etcetera, are not right or wrong by definition. What is important is to be clear about the narrative and the mental framework. The choice of format really depends on the narrative's intended audience: An article or essay may be very effective if it is aimed at academia, but it is useless if you are trying to reach the persuadable center.



Simple techniques for constructing new narratives

The first step is always to unmask and resist dominant narratives (see previous chapter). In this process, the starting point should be the most visible part: the messages and the stories they tell us. Next, more in-depth work is required: Discovering the interests that they serve and the values and visions they intend to instill in the audience.

Once the narrative and its weaknesses have been identified, there are two more steps to constructing an alternative narrative:

- 1 | Identify and create transformational narratives rooted in values.
- 2 | Frame and communicate messages rooted in these new narratives.

Identifying and designing a transformative narrative is not about defining the messages to be transmitted during a second phase, but about finding the values and paradigms that can attract the public to a new interpretation of the situation. It is not about thinking in concrete words, but in broad visions.

This process can be more internal and driven from within the organization, but without overlooking the value of daily practice, the observation of reality and the contributions of activists. It cannot be a mere theoretical discussion, therefore, it is important for those working on the definition of a new narrative to have a thorough knowledge of the issue they are working on, in all its complexity, both from a theoretical perspective and its practical implications.

There is no magic formula for creating a new narrative. But there are some techniques that point the way for a narrative to develop. Here are three of the best known and most effective:

The use of models and speaking in the first person.

A person embodies the values that the new narrative wants to introduce, and teaches them by example. The reference person becomes tangible proof that the dominant narrative is not true. An example would be the way sex education was redefined in high schools in Catalonia (see previous chapter), where the aim was to build male complicity from vulnerability through the educator's experience. Another example could be the work of describing the everyday life of some Afro people in Spain to break with the clichés about them as a collective: In order to counteract the image that all Afro people are migrants and are just here temporarily, for instance, have them talk about their daily lives on social media.

Reversal of the dramatic triangle.

Classic stories usually include at least three distinct characters: the hero, the villain and the victim. Each is placed at a vertex of a triangle. First, identify who the dominant narrative assigns to each role. For instance, in the anti-migration discourse, the police are the heroes, the local people are the victims, and the migrants are the villains. Reversal consists of changing roles: For example, if the police are the heroes in the dominant narrative, they may be the villains in the new narrative. When the three roles have been reassigned, the plots that make sense of the stories emerge much more easily (see the example of the National Immigrant Youth Alliance).

Imagine winning. This involves going beyond the specific need that the narrative is addressing, and asking "What if we win, then what do we do?" Many struggles have very specific objectives, affecting a very specific sector of the population, so it is difficult for them to arouse the interest of other audiences. For instance, a law to facilitate family visits to minors in prison is not very appealing to the general public. But if we ask: "And if we get it, then what do we do?" The answer might be, "transform the justice system, so it doesn't just go after individuals racialized people." Certainly, and then what? "End crime," which means eradicating its structural causes and would ultimately result in "living together in a better world." Prison law matters to a very small minority of people, nonetheless, very few would dare say they don't want to "live together in a better world." Having a better life is something everyone cares about; that's the entry point for the new narrative to reach people. Commercial marketing has been using this technique for decades: Coca-Cola does not sell a product to quench thirst; it presents us with a product that promises a ration of happiness.

The Bring Them Home campaign launched by the National Immigrant Youth Alliance (NIYA) used the dramatic triangle inversion to change the narrative about undocumented migrants in the United States. During Donald Trump's campaign, curbing migration was a key theme: the Build the Wall message. Conservative media disseminated a narrative that depicted the American people as the victims of an invasion that would end their way of life; the villains were the migrants coming to the United States to hoard welfare payments, impose their customs and take working-class jobs for minimum wage; while the heroes were the politicians and law enforcement who would introduce new laws to expel undocumented migrants and wage war at the border to keep out illegals. A border - the wall - that protected America's freedoms and way of life.

But that was not what the NIYA could see in real life. From the point of view of people who had come to the United States as children and who had become adults without a residence permit, the dramatic triangle was very different: The heroes were their parents, who had left everything to go to the United States and offer their children a better life; the villains were the politicians who passed anti-immigration laws and the police who could deport them at any moment; and the victims were the migrants whose entire lives were in the United States and who, at any moment, could be expelled to a country that was not their own. The border did not make them safe: It separated people and shattered lives.

An important part of the new narrative was to offer villains the chance to become heroes; that is, it gave them the chance to change their role with a dignified and legitimate choice. This way, it avoided demonizing and typecasting, and offered a real way out to those involved: The only thing the villains - in this case, the politicians - had to do was to accept the demands of the victims. So, NIYA launched the "Bring Them Home" campaign, whereby several migrants who had made their entire lives in the United States decided to leave the country and "self-deport" to Mexico.

They then took a stand at the border, and stated their demand: Re-entry to the United States, where they had spent their entire lives. They decided to act at the border precisely because it fit the idea of the "point of destruction," where people and objects are destroyed. Finally, after going through the detention center, the people who had self-deported were able to re-enter the United States; this demonstrated that the border was not impassable, and that there was a narrative beyond Build the Wall.



Aside from these techniques, it is essential to define the exact point where the new narrative seeks to have an impact: The place – be it physical or symbolic – to attack the hegemonic discourse and launch actions of protest or disobedience. There are five basic points to aim the attack on the hegemonic narrative, known as «the five points of intervention»:

Point of production. This is the site where the products that have to do with the problems we want to solve are manufactured. In the environmental struggle, an example might be a factory-farm.

Point of destruction. The place where the things or people we want to protect are destroyed. The US/Mexico border in the Bring Them Home campaign.

Point of consumerism. The place where products that have to do with the problems we want to solve are purchased. If we are talking about climate change, an example would be a gas station.

Point of decision. The place where decisions are made that have bearing on the problems we seek to solve. Government institutions or the large corporation headquarters could be an example.

Point of assumption. Places where changes can be made in popular culture trends. The entertainment industry, the media and social networks establish the icons of popular culture.

When intervening at these five points, the new narrative has to establish synergies with other actions to be successful. This is where the relationship between the construction of new narratives and grassroots activism becomes important.

Seizing the day: Joining forces for social change

For narratives to achieve their goals, they have to dovetail with other strategies, both short- and long-term. The ultimate goal of a new narrative is to change power in a lasting way – for the long term – not just to achieve a victory in a sectional struggle. And that is only possible by partnering with other agents of change.

Online is useless without off-line. A few million likes on a video, by themselves, change absolutely nothing. There must be agents to repeat the message on other channels, who tell new stories that reinforce the same narrative, who use other intervention techniques – such as street activism – to jump into the pages of the news outlets and obtain the desired legislative changes.

We need to be ready to take advantage of moments of crisis as a window of opportunity to create new narratives. The case of 15-M in Spain and the PAH (see chapter one) is a plain example. Although the PAH contributed to the explosion on 15-M, the massive nature of the movement made it possible to disseminate the messages created by the Platform, reaching audiences that did not live in fear of eviction.

If the third sector and its media partners are the only ones fighting against disinformation and working to disseminate new narratives, the battle is lost. However, citizens are not experts in communication, nor do they have the time or the resources required to engage in social transformation by changing narratives.

Therefore, it is necessary to create tools and provide them to citizens, so that they can become our allies without having to make great efforts. Organizations cannot reach everywhere or be everywhere at once; on the other hand, citizens can. A person is perfectly capable of cutting through a pernicious narrative if he or she has the right tools to do so.

Once we add new stakeholders to the narrative, there is a risk that its values will change, soften or even distort. That is why, within a social movement composed of different organizations, it is essential for everyone to share the same narrative.

Top down or bottom up? The coexistence of activists and professionals

Many organizations still believe that the construction of new narratives is the exclusive responsibility of communications departments. On the contrary, there are other grassroots organizations that feel a kind of allergy to the idea of incorporating professionals, with the false premise that anyone is capable of doing anything; especially in digital environments, where many people believe that having a Twitter account makes you a community manager. Neither of these two views is correct.

Bridges need to be built between professionals and activists; because the former have a better understanding of the techniques and tools for building a solid narrative, while the latter have first-hand experience with the issues, the context and its specifics, and have the ability to act at the points of intervention.

In the past, the partnership between (creative) artists and activists was very strong, especially throughout the twentieth century. Nowadays, this alliance is much weaker, and the result has been that we are losing ground in the field of narratives. In Latin America, on the other hand, many initiatives that try to reconnect both worlds: Weaving partnerships, for example, between professional illustrators and social movements.

Having design and communication professionals on board makes it possible to express the narratives of change in more contemporary and higher quality formats. The inclusion of expert voices makes it possible to talk about inequality, for example, with creativity or humor, at a time when the "exploitation" of images of misery has spent the force they had in the past.

In certain scenarios, grassroots activism cannot get a word in edgewise because taking a public stand puts lives at risk. While it is true that journalism has been - and is - extractivist, in the sense that it abandons the news and its protagonists when it has already got what it wants, in some cases it can adopt the role of an agent of change, especially in situations when community lives are at risk. When justified fear silences the protagonists, they cannot be asked to raise their voices.

The term «family» is often associated with conservative values; right-wing political parties use the term as one of the pillars of their program. In Latin America, this phenomenon is very present and is strong enough to upend the initiatives of the most progressive sectors. In Colombia, for instance, the peace process with the guerrilla included a plebiscite. The hardliner conservative groups used the excuse of defending the «family», to quickly boycott the agreements and the parts that referred to LGBTI rights.

The progressive collectives realized that the term "family" includes many values that are important to the majority of the population, such as loyalty, solidarity or love. They understood that they could not accept that the "family" should be used to curtail rights, since it is a very important institution for all citizens (we all have one). In fact, they realized that the left had every right to reclaim the term as their own, because many progressive policies actually defend families (women, children, sexist and domestic violence, for example). So they set out to reclaim that space and reappropriate the word "family" for progressive struggles. But first they had to create a strategy to develop a new narrative.

So they launched a research project. First they wanted to understand the way the public responded to certain ideas of change, such as that the family no longer fits a single model of father, mother and children. They found that people were very aware that families no longer always follow the traditional structure, but that it is also very important to preserve elements such as mutual support and togetherness among family members - values that, actually have nothing to do with the composition of families.

The study involved surveys that made it possible to design focus groups to prepare conversations. They tried out the discourse they had been working on in these groups: The idea that the term "family" belongs to all of us. They also looked at the way families are represented on social media, and conducted surveys on Facebook to detect the effectiveness of different messages. They also connected with the academic world that deals with these issues, to see what their discourse on the family was like.

At the time of launching the narrative, the movements decided to focus on convincing the "persuadable center;" people who are not very committed to either the right or the left, but who are on the lookout for points of reference. Until then, in terms of family-related issues, those references had been basically conservative. Now the social movements were proposing new rights-based references.

To this end, it was essential to connect this new narrative and activism. They reached out to human rights organizations with the idea that they should begin to connect the idea of "rights" to the concept of "family well-being." They had to understand that the conservative sectors used the term for a political objective, while the defense of the family actually has to do with the defense of human rights. Since the new narrative was constructed, they were able to approach other progressive organizations to join forces and launch their messages on multiple channels. Although the goal was far from easy, because conservative sectors have used the term "family" to their own advantage for decades, the movements have begun to detect that the hegemonic discourse has a crack that opens the door to change.



The transformative power of art: Creativity for the construction of new narratives

The idea that there are no new narratives without creativity is a constant. And, if we talk about «creativity», art would be its maximum expression. The relationship between art and social movements goes back a long way, although it is currently much less evident than in the past.

The essence of artistic creation has always been the creation of narratives. And not only that: the creation of narratives to question dominant narratives. By its very nature, art is able to surprise, question and open new perspectives. It is able to question the present and the past, and to propose a future.

Artivism is the combination of the real power of art and activism. That is, the use of artistic forms of expression to deliver a political message - or a whole narrative - to the population; for instance, instead of organizing a march, staging a performance. On the surface, it seems like an interesting way to get the attention of audiences in a world suffering from an overdose of stimuli. But, does it work? The answer is in the example of «The Copenhagen Experiment».

Artivism, never consists of elevating the artist to the role of an oracle. Selecting an artist at random and placing him or her in the streets of a city with a mission of spreading a political message is useless. The only way for creative activism to work is with help from local experts. You have to understand that knowledge is on the street where the work is done. When you do activism to change the law, for example, you need good lawyers with in-depth knowledge of the legal system. But when you do cultural activism, the knowledge is in the culture, in the street; it can only be successful when local artists and activists collaborate and form a partnership.

In May 2018, «The Copenhagen Experiment», was undertaken in an attempt to test how effective "artivism" was compared to other classic forms of activism, such as speeches or handing out fliers (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PvbwELdUC10>). The issue was chosen that would not lead to excessive polarization in society, something that did not elicit too many preconceived notions in people. The issue was the introduction of a meat tax to compensate for the environmental impact of livestock farming.

The group organized two different types of actions. Over the course of three days, they ran traditional activist actions, and artistic activist actions. On the one hand, the traditional activists did things like handing out leaflets in the street and making speeches on a wooden box. On the other hand, the artists wore cow costumes, played farting sounds over loudspeakers and filled the sidewalks with excrement with a sign that read «this cow pie is a problem».

To assess the effectiveness of the actions, the group interviewed over a hundred passers-by, wrote more than thirty observation reports, added up the petitions signed and leaflets handed out.... Two weeks later, the group contacted the people they had interviewed, asking them if they remembered the campaign and if they had taken any action on the meat tax. After analyzing the data that had been collected, the conclusions were eye-opening.

Most people stated that traditional activist actions were «annoying», while artivism piqued their curiosity and made them question some things. Analysis of the quantitative data also revealed that people were much more willing to get involved - sign a petition by putting their name on it, for example - when the outreach was through artivism.

Although it should be kept in mind that Copenhagen is a European city with a high standard of living and a tolerant atmosphere (it has always had social democratic mayors), the conclusion seems clear: to get people's attention and try to convince them, you need to be creative.



But does this work or not?

Evaluating results

Evaluation should be an indispensable part of any social transformation project. It is said that "you can't change what you don't measure." And it should not be left for last, as if it were a secondary task to be completed "when there is time." Actually, the idea of evaluation should be incorporated into the project from the outset and serve to set in motion a process of reflection - of transformation - of the project or organization itself.

The most obvious method for measuring the impact of a campaign in a digital environment is to use metrics, everything from counting "likes" to looking at Google Analytics figures. The quantitative data is a first insight into the impact of the campaign, but it can also be very misleading. Data tells us how many people have clicked or watched a video, but not how many have changed their minds or decided to take action. Metrics are not indicators of social change.

Moreover, social networks are not neutral territory (see next chapter), so they have no interest in promoting narratives for social transformation. It is not uncommon for them to manipulate their search engines to "hide" those publications that do not fit the values or aesthetics of the platform: What's called shadowbanning. If search engine results are manipulated and it is difficult to access certain content, it is not really worthwhile to take the linked metrics into account.

Instead of counting clicks and views, it is much better to evaluate based on the objectives and intentions of the project. These objectives are set at the beginning of the campaign and can evolve along with the evaluation process. However, it is important to set them at the beginning of the process, when it has not yet been affected by other constraints. An unforeseen event may derail the process halfway from reaching the objective, but it is no reason to fail to evaluate a specific aspect of the project.

At the moment of establishing the objectives and intentions of the project, we can divide them into two large groups:

The micro-objectives: From taking care of all the people who are involved in the campaign to meeting the established schedule, or building new alliances with other agents of change. Often, they are essential for the success of the campaign, but not the ultimate goal.

Macro-objectives: Changes that have a decisive impact on the issue we are trying to address, from a more structural point of view. Ultimately, these would be the legislative changes that have occurred since the introduction of the narrative. But it should not be forgotten that these kinds of changes are multi-factorial; they are not just due to the introduction of a new narrative.

Aside from clicks, there are other qualitative and quantitative ways to evaluate. The classic target audience survey would be the most commonly used strategy, and there are many different ways of sharing the questionnaire to achieve maximum dissemination. At the same time, it is essential that the questions be designed carefully. One option, for example, would be to present the survey as a contest: Asking the public to explain what they have done about issue X in exchange for a possible reward.

In the case of narratives, evaluation should be a recurring process. There is no point in doing an evaluation at the end of the project and forgetting about it. To detect changes in public opinion, you need to revisit the evaluation regularly; some subject matter experts talk about six-month periods. Be that as it may, evaluating any change in narrative is a long-term process.

Some (concrete) evaluation proposals

No methodology for evaluating the impact of new narratives is going to be applicable in every case. However, there are some indicators that make it possible to evaluate specific situations, and they can be an inspiration when developing the objectives and intentions of each project.

The Center for Arts Activism has created the Universal Methodology for Contextual Assessment (UMCA), which is used to evaluate projects that apply activist methods. The basis of this evaluation is always the original intention of the project. The tools developed for this methodology can be downloaded at <https://c4aa.org/assessment-toolset>.

The UMCA emerged from the accumulated experience of numerous artists over the years, and its evaluation system is based on three main principles. They are the following:

- 1 | What is the intention and what are the objectives of the project. Metrics should not appear until a much later stage in the project.

2 | The creator is at the center of the evaluation. Or, put another way, evaluation should be central to the creation of the project.

3 | Social science evaluations are never exact. But by adding up different evaluation factors (adding 1+1+1), we have a better chance of success.

The UMCA method, instead of saying «this works and that doesn't», is based on a series of questions - more than fifty - about specific aspects such as the objectives, the audience, the ethical principles, the interventions carried out, the aspects to be improved or the metrics of the platforms. Based on these questions, all the artists on the team are invited to reflect, and they will decide whether the intervention has worked or not. As mentioned before, the process itself should also be an invitation to transformation.

On the other hand, the Universitat Jaume I of Castelló (Spain) has developed a series of indicators to evaluate the work carried out by Development NGOs. These indicators revolve around two interconnected dimensions: The functioning of the organization itself and the narratives it puts forth. In this latter area, the indicators aim to detect whether the narratives disseminated by an NGDO are in line with the principles that should guide social transformation.

Although they are designed for a very specific purpose, the four principles that are behind these indicators are useful for discovering whether the narrative fits a transformative vision. These four areas of assessment are:

Rights and (eco)social justice.
Do the narratives present and address the issues from a rights-based perspective?

Recognition, dignity and agency:
Do the stories focus on people and communities, and do these actors participate in the construction of the narratives?

Successes, achievements and proposals.

Do the objectives call for action and the implementation of a process of transformation?

Participation and communication.

Each action undertakes the responsibility of activating those cultures that defy individualistic tendencies.

In all, the evaluation indicators add up to more than forty questions under the four principles. This self-assessment method helps organizations reflect around the political approach, the sustainability of the project, the use of non-hegemonic narratives and whether narratives are encouraging collective action. These indicators will be published on the web shortly and, although they are not intended for use as a generic narrative evaluation, they do point to the four main areas that should not be missing in any process of assessing a narrative, so they are a good starting point. However, a general mechanism for evaluating narratives needs to be developed for the entire sector, beyond the specific case of NGDOs.

Contributors to this section...

Lisa VeneKlasen
(JASS)

Clara Jiménez Cruz
(Maldita.es)

Lucía Delgado
(Portavoz PAH)

Alejandra Alayza
(Oxfam Perú)

María José Gascón Artigas
(Oxfam Intermón)

Lucía Mbomio
(Activist, Journalist and Writer)

Natalia Diez
(Maldita Migración)

Diana Kallas
(Oxfam in MENA)

Cris Lagunas
(Center for Story-Based Strategy)

Proyecto Una

Sebastián Lehuedé
(Tech and data Governance)

Stephen Duncombe
(Gallatin School, NYU)

Luz Elena Rodea Saldívar
(Oxfam México)

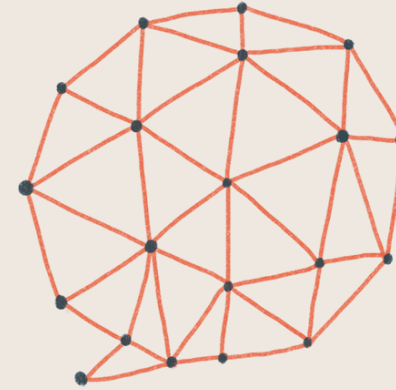
Alejandro Gamboa-Hoyos
(University of Antioquía Political Scientist)

Alejandra Ibarra
(Political Scientist and Journalist)

Itziar Rosado
(ONGAWA)

Alessandra Farné
(Profesora UJI)

Eloísa Nos Aldás
(Profesora UJI)



New narratives in the digital environment



The fourth chapter discusses the ways that narratives have adapted to the digital environment, and the challenges it poses, especially when certain activist sectors still view technological advances with certain suspicion

From mass media to social media

Manipulating beliefs through the use of narratives is as old as the use of language, both to reinforce power structures and to challenge them. However, the use of digital technologies to disseminate these narratives is a much more recent process. Its most notable effect is that it has greatly accelerated the process by which narratives are disseminated, propagated and consolidated.

Starting in the 1980s, the mass media underwent a process of consolidation that has practically put an end to the model of independent ownership. The media have become part of large communication conglomerates that are in the hands of elites, so the messages that they disseminate fit the hegemonic narratives. Traditional media have closed their doors to most social movements and civil society.

The advent of the internet meant that a space opened for the public. Suddenly, social movements had somewhere to publish their content and a network to communicate with other activists and organizations. Although the alternative press has always existed, before the internet it was more difficult to get access to dissident narratives and, above all, to have a space from which to publish and disseminate them. In this sense, the internet has pierced the hegemonic space and has made it possible to advance the struggles of social movements.

When the internet was an alternative... and when did it stop being so?

Many people understood the arrival of the internet as a 180-degree turn in the communications ecosystem. The power to publish was no longer in the hands of the elites, but in the hands of the people, who could tell the world what they wanted from their cell phones. It was no longer necessary for an editorial board to approve the dissemination of content: Everyone was free to say whatever he or she saw fit. The communications space that had been an oligopoly became dominated by diversity.

But beyond this idealized vision - typical of the early days of the internet - the truth is that there has been another 180-degree turn, and it has returned to a place very similar to the starting point. The problems of the off-line world, from racism to machismo, have entered the digital platforms, and with an added aggravating factor: The platforms are not designed for collaboration and in-depth debate, but to encourage polarization and the creation of groups that reinforce these beliefs. The goal is to click-through, not exchange. Nowadays, polarized messages and hate speech dominate commercial social media. There is a high price to pay for having a public profile on the internet when you are a racialized person or identify as LGBTBI.

Making a deal with the devil: Using social media to spread new narratives

Does it make sense, then, to disseminate a transformative narrative through channels - like commercial, mainstream social media - that are dominated by opposition discourses that favor polarization and misinformation?

Within social movements there has been a strong anti-technology tradition. Since technology is at the heart of the system, many collectives believe that it conditions the dissemination of narratives in such a way that they lose their original meaning; or, worse, end up being captured by the dominant discourse. But the fact is that no one is brainwashed by simply using Facebook. It all depends on the messages to which a person is exposed, that is why it is important for social movements to have a presence on social media.

First, because giving up on social media would leave it entirely in the hands of hate speech. It would mean ceding absolute hegemony to the discourse of the ultra-right. Second, because people have used the internet to explain who they are (self-representation), and created communities outside the dominant discourse. These groups have made it possible to join forces, multiply messages and reach many more people. The internet has made it possible to structure alternatives to the dominant narratives.

However, as these alternative communities have become visible, they have also become targets and victims of attacks. The response to hate speech must always come from creativity: We have to provide different and innovative visions of what technology has to offer. Because, despite its drawbacks, the internet has made it possible to take new narratives much further (and to many more audiences).

The digital medium has its own narratives

Tech companies also disseminate narratives that give structure and order to the digital world. These narratives replicate the dominant values of the analog environment by emphasizing individualism and the role of private enterprise as drivers of human evolution. Specifically, the technological era has created two major narratives of its own:

The single founder principle. The large tech companies are the result of the vision of a single individual - the creator, always a white man - who sets himself up as the winner of the game without paying the slightest attention to the victims he may have left along the way (exploited and marginalized groups). It is the vision of the winner who rises above the losers. However, in Latin America and the United Kingdom, alternatives to this model are emerging from initiatives that defend the collective ownership of platforms ("platform socialism"); however, these structures are not problem-free either, since horizontal democracy ends up eroding relationships and creates internal power dynamics that threaten the long-term sustainability.

Technological Solutionism Ever since the Enlightenment, technology has been used as a measure of a country's development. This narrative argues that new technologies have an answer for everything from hunger to climate change. The solution to technology's problems is always more technology, regardless of the negative consequences many groups suffer. Technological solutionism is an important part of the capitalist framework, it includes the financial industry, the cultural industry and the fossil fuel industry. Technology plays a decisive role in these three sectors, so it can be said to be a component of the capitalist heart.

In discussions about the problems brought about by the use of the internet, a lot has been said about the concept of privacy, for instance, but the negative consequences of these two dominant narratives are not questioned at all. If platforms are not democratic, how can we shed light on the problems affecting the users and find effective solutions? There are no real solutions without democracy.

Chile has the most astronomical observatories of any country in the world. These centers generate an enormous amount of data (comparable to YouTube). When the Chilean government realized that such a huge amount of data was being generated in their country, it wanted to take advantage of it and attract scientists from all over the world to the country. But it immediately had to face a question: What do we do with all that data, what kind of governance do we apply to it? Do we give it away, or do we regulate it? In other words, what is the best way to profit from all that data, one of the most valuable commodities in today's world?

There are two major models (narratives) of data governance. The first advocates for open data and that any person or institution should have access to it. But, when it comes down to it, those who take advantage of this open data are the organizations that have the power and means to make the most of it. Even if the data is open and available to everyone, citizens are not able to do anything with it.

The second model has to do with the concept of sovereignty, closely linked to the idea of the nation-state, but also to certain sectors on the left. This model proposes that data be controlled to counteract the negative effects of technology. In practice, this model is applied in countries such as China and Russia, where the State exercises strict control over the network.

Neither of these two visions meets the needs of the global South, so what was needed was to open a third way. This alternative way was defined under the concept of "autonomy," involving two major ideas: First, a democratic organization based on assemblies; and second, a way of understanding oneself in the world as closely tied to the environment and which stresses interdependence with the territory, so that if there is an impact on the latter, the autonomy of the people also suffers the same impact. Autonomy understood as self-determination to confront the capitalist, colonialist and patriarchal system.

This interpretation of the concept of autonomy can be seen in the relationship among the local communities of the Atacama Desert - where most of the astronomical observatories are located - and the institutions that govern these large data centers as well. In recent years there have been certain conflicts between these two stakeholders, especially over placing observatories in areas that are sacred to the communities or in territories where the environmental impact has been serious and irreversible. According to the concept of autonomy, the communities that are directly affected by the extraction of data from their territory ought to be part of deciding what is done with all this information.

Beyond the ideas of «sovereignty» or «open data», the concept of «autonomy» returns ownership of data to communities. Arguably, it turns data into a common good. This vision is the opposite of data colonialism, which is currently being pursued by all the big tech companies.



A bunch of guys locked up in their rooms: The other digital divide

In the debate on the use of new technologies to disseminate new narratives, part of the problem is that the conversation is not crosscutting. Although all communication is digital nowadays, many social movements still lack a strategy and representation on these channels: They have not reflected about their presence on social media, about the meaning of their messages, about data governance. Activists from different groups often live in watertight silos.

Currently, the debate about the problems and contradictions posed by the digital ecosystem is only taking place within collectives dedicated to new technologies. Activists and academics working on (and with) the social media are the ones proposing alternatives to the model that currently governs the internet.

Common sense says that, in order for this debate to be crosscutting, the most logical thing to do would be to bring together different social movements (those dedicated to technologies and those involved in other struggles) to share knowledge, create new synergies and develop strategies to address the problem. But when this approach has been tried, it ends up creating two subgroups and people are divided: When talking about issues such as caregiving, only the caregiving collectives speak; and when talking about technology, only the technologists speak. Although it is very difficult to avoid these divisions, we have to balance the scales. We don't all need to become programming professionals, but we should understand how the world in the internet works. Off-line and online collaboration must be encouraged to bridge the "other" digital divide - the one between traditional activists and online activists - because this is the only way to regain lost ground on the internet.

Han contribuido a la elaboración de este apartado...

Diana Kallas
(Oxfam in MENA)

Sebastián Lehedé
(Tech and Data Governance)

Paz Peña
(Feminism and Technology)

Proyecto Una

Oyidiya Oji
(Data Scientist)



Epilogue

What do we do now? Ideas for moving forward

In closing, here are some of the questions of interest that emerged during the webinar sessions and that served to close the «Let's Change the Story» cycle of debates.

We need to learn to pay a lot more attention and go more in-depth when reading hegemonic narratives, to move past mere intellectual analysis. It is important to realize that narratives affect us at all levels, so spaces for multidisciplinary analysis need to be created. Analyze the effects of hegemonic narratives on the body, heart and mind.

This is not so much a matter of giving the floor to the collectives that create their narratives, but of providing spaces for them to express and disseminate them. Rather than pursuing testimonials that decide to present themselves, those in privilege should make spaces available to the communities in order for them to create their own narratives. It is more coherent for a survivor to talk about what happened to them than to see someone from academia or an organization speaking in their stead. Mapping experiences to give voice to the excluded.

Project evaluations should be shared. Collectives and people who have been involved in building and disseminating a narrative need to be able to participate in the evaluation, because they are the ones who have first-hand knowledge about it. To balance the weight of data and metrics when assessing a campaign, it is essential to establish participatory spaces where the different stakeholders can make qualitative assessments.

It is much easier to detect the narratives where we do not want to enter, the mental frameworks we want to avoid, than to propose new discourses and imaginaries. We have to decide to propose alternatives, solutions, answers. We have to discuss problems with constructive proposals: Not just say that racism is unacceptable, but also explain the opportunities that diversity and multiculturalism offer society as a whole.

Pessimism must be left behind in order to delve deeper into transformation. Step out of other narratives, and make creativity the center of everything. Dare to be original, to try to communicate with a sense of humor, with unusual formats, to regain the partnership between art and activism.

We need to focus more on achievements, and not so much on problems. Focus narratives on results: Use "imagine winning" (see chapter 3). Instead of focusing on the particular problems that affect us, focus on the shared ideals that are generated by the alternative.

There is an urgent need to change the humanitarian narrative. Abandon the images of misery and the charitable approach. Dare to enter into new partnerships out of solidarity and transformation: Being radical, in the sense of addressing the roots of the problems.

We must work together as a network. We talk about it a lot, but it is very difficult for us to do it. Organizations have to share resources. Get over the obsession of putting our logo and our stamp on material we produce. Give those materials away to activism.

We have to make an effort to get young people on board, they currently seem to be very far away from the more traditional social movements. Discover how they can and want to get involved, and dare to use new models of activism and organization. And don't forget the importance of working from the community, in the final analysis, they have the knowledge.

Do not hold on to preconceived ideas. Do not be afraid to rethink things, do not allow ourselves to be enslaved by ideologies. New problems have new solutions, which we may not be able to imagine within our own mental framework, and which may challenge what we thought were immovable truths. Do not be afraid to acknowledge when we are wrong, because it is the first step to be able to learn.

Webinar presenters and moderators

Isabel Crabtree-Condor

Knowledge Broker on Narratives. Curator of Narrative Power & Collective Action anthologies.

www.policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/narrative-power-and-collective-action-conversations-with-people-working-to-chan-621020/

Webinar 4: Narratives, Civic Space and Active Citizenship

Alejandra Alayza

Sociologist. Founder of Actúa.Pe, fighting inequalities in Peru

www.actua.pe

Webinar 4: Narratives, Civic Space and Active Citizenship

Natalia Diez

Journalist and audiovisual communicator. Coordinating Maldita Migración.

www.maldita.es/migracion

Webinar 2: Disident and divergent Narratives

Stephen Duncombe

Culture and Media Professor, studying the intersection of culture and politics. Co-founder and Research Director of the Center for Artistic Activism.

www.stephenduncombe.org | www.c4aa.org

Webinar 6: Narratives and power: how do we move on?

Alessandra Farné

Professor at Universitat Jaume I (UJI) and Researcher at Instituto Interuniversitario de Desarrollo Social y Paz de la UJI. Projecto with ONGAWA - "Nadie dijo que fuera fácil 2".

www.desarrollosocialypaz.uji.es

Webinar 6: Narratives and power: how do we move on?

Karoline Fernández de la Hoz

Director of the Spanish Observatory of racism and xenophobia. Secretaría de estado de Migraciones - OBERAXE.

www.inclusion.gob.es/oberaxe/es/index.htm

Webinar 2: Disident and divergent Narratives

Alejandro Gamboa-Hoyos

Political Scientist at Universidad de Antioquia - Colombia.

www.bridges-puentes.org | www.familiasahora.org

Webinar 4: Narratives, civic space and active citizenship

Diana García Mosquera

Feminist, antiracist and anticolonialist. Member of the coordination group of care and domestic workers-Zaragoza.

Webinar 3: Narrativas for Wellbeing

María José Gascón Artigas

Program Lead Desigualdad Cero - Oxfam Intermón.

www.oxfamintermon.org/es/publicacion/barometro-desinformacion-odio

Webinar 2: Dissident and divergent Narratives

Alejandra Ibarra Chaoul

Political Scientist and Journalist. CEO of Democracy Defenders.

www.defensorxsdelademocracia.org

Webinar 4: Narratives, Civic Space and active citizenship

Clara Jiménez Cruz

Journalist. Cofounder and CEO Maldita.es, the first fact-checking digital media in Spain.

www.maldita.es

Webinar 1: Narratives and Power: how do we start?

Diana Kallas

Inequality Senior Policy Adviser - Oxfam inMENA.

www.arabic.oxfam.org

Webinar 3: Narratives for Wellbeing

Cris Lagunas

Center Story-based Strategy. Activist, popular education and protection of vulnerable communities.

www.storybasedstrategy.org

Webinar 3: Narratives for wellbeing.

Sebastián Lehuedé

Activist and Researcher at Centro de Gobernanza y Derechos Humanos de la Universidad de Cambridge. Member of Tierra Común, collective fighting against data colonialism.

www.polis.cam.ac.uk/staff/dr-sebastian-lehuede | www.tierracomun.net

Webinar 5: Narratives, technology and Global Justice

Lucía Mbomío

Activist, journalist and writer. Analysis on Black people representation in social media, movies and publicity.

www.luciambomio.com

Webinar 2: Dissident and divergent narratives

Mariana Mendoza

Center Story-based Strategy. Organizer, narrative nerd and popular educator. Social Justice and Just transition.

www.storybasedstrategy.org

Webinar 3: Narratives for Wellbeing.

Eloísa Nos Aldás

Professor and researcher on transformative communication at IUDESP (UJI).

Webinar 1: Narratives and Power: where do we start?

Oyidiya Oji

Data Scientist with antiracist and decolonial perspective. Reseraches and maps resistance and re-owning technology projects with special focus on AI.

Webinar 5: Narratives, technology and global justice.

Teo Pardo

Feminist and trans Activist. Secondary teacher and sexual educator.

Webinar 2: Dissident and diverdent Narrativas.

Paz Peña

Activist and independent researcher on the intersection of Digital technologies, feminism and social justice.

www.pazpena.com

Webinar 5: Narratives, technology and global justice

Jethro Pettit

Social Anthropologist. Learning facilitator for organizational and social change.

www.jethropeppet.com

Webinar 6: Narratives and Power: how do we move on?

Proyecto Una

Writting collective reflecting on paradigm shift, capitalism and patriarchy in the age of internet.

twitter.com/proyectouna | instagram.com/proyectouna

Webinar 5: Narratives, technology and Global Justice

Patrick Reinsborough

Narratives Strategist. Working in the intersection of systemic crisis, narrative shift and organizing transformative movements

www.patrickreinsborough.org

Webinar 3: Narratives for Wellbeing

Luz Rodea Saldívar

Feminist and political Scientist, Care Program, Oxfam México

www.oxfam.mx

Webinar 3: Narratives for Wellbeing

Itziar Rosado

Movements and citizenship coordinator at ONGAWA. Project "Nadie Dijo que Fuera fácil 2".

www.ongawa.org

Webinar 6: Narratives and power: how do we move on?

Montse Santolino

Journalist. Cooperation and Global Justice. Lafede. cat - Organizations for Global Justice.

www.lafede.cat

Webinar 6: Narratives and power: how do we move on?

Lisa VeneKlasen

Strategist, Writer and popular educator. Founder and senior adviser of Just Associates (JASS)

www.justassociates.org

Webinar 1: Narratives and power: where do we start?

LINKS TO CONTENT

Narratives and Power: Where do we start:

What are narratives and what is their relation with Power? A Methodological, conceptual and learning overview.

[Link to the webinar recording](#) (only in Spanish)

Graphic rapport of webinar by [Visual Materia](#) (only in Spanish)



Dissident and Divergent Narratives

Activists, professionals and journalists share their experiences developing transformative narratives in migration, sexuality, decoloniality and antiracism projects.

[Link to the webinar recording 2](#) (only in Spanish)



Narratives for wellbeing

Is it possible to generate narratives that transform the values of capitalism? Experiences and approaches will be presented departing from care, antiausterity and climate justice projects.

[Link to the webinar recording 3](#) (only in Spanish)



Narratives, Civic Space and Active Citizenship

From different contexts where civic space is shrinking, we will present approaches to defending citizens voice and right to participation.

[Link to the webinar recording 4](#) (only in Spanish)



Narratives technology and global justice

Collectives and digital activists will share the relevance of fighting techno-solutionism with counter-narratives of digital sovereignty, digital self-defense and technology decolonialization.

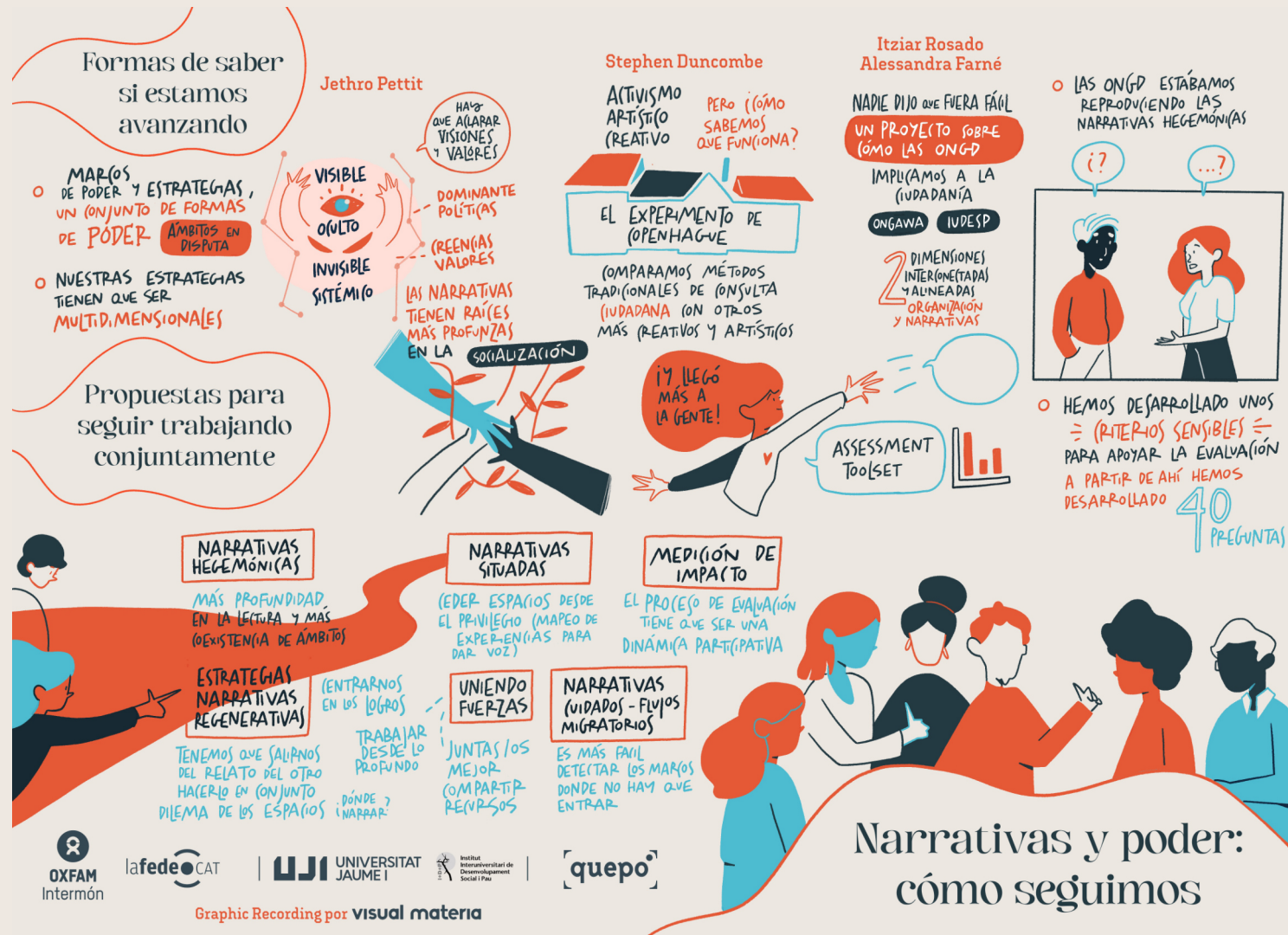
[Link to the webinar recording 5](#) (only in Spanish)



Narratives and power: How do we move on?

Proposals for following-up the work on narratives, space for networking and joint initiatives.

[Link to the webinar recording 6](#) (only in Spanish)



Graphic Recording por visual materia

Coordination: Rodrigo Barahona, Berta Diumaró Saperas, Eloísa Nos Aldás, Judith Membrives, Sonia Ros Muriel, Montse Santolino.

Edition and content: Alexandre Casanovas [Quepo]

Design: Chus Portela [Quepo]

Illustration: Eva Palomar

A Project of



With the support of

