

Shifting the Narrative

What it Takes to Reframe the Debate for Social Justice in the US

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Since the 2016 election, interest in the concept of “narrative” has spiked in the nonprofit and philanthropic worlds. There exists a growing consensus among people committed to social justice that traditional change efforts like organizing, advocacy, and litigation cannot be fully effective or lasting unless they are integrated with a narrative change strategy. Definitions of what narrative means vary greatly, and the art and craft of changing it can seem mysterious. But experience and research point to clear, replicable approaches for reshaping public narratives in support of social justice.

What is Narrative and Why does it Matter?

At The Opportunity Agenda, we define narrative as “a Big Story, rooted in shared values and common themes, that influences how audiences process information and make decisions.” Narratives are conveyed in the political and policy discourse, but also in news media, popular culture, social media, and at dinner tables across communities.

As recent experience shows, many audiences are invulnerable to facts that do not fit within a narrative that they can understand and embrace.

Public narratives around criminal justice offer an example of how this idea plays out in practice. During the latter half of the 20th century, the dominant narrative on criminal justice was one rooted in law and order, personal responsibility, punishment, and an “us vs. them” connotation frequently bound up with implicit or explicit racial bias. Terms like “tough on crime,” “war on drugs,” “just say no,” and “don’t do the crime if you can’t do the time,” all flow from and reinforce that narrative. Political communications like George H.W. Bush’s notorious Willie Horton ad have used that narrative to great effect.

The competing narrative has been one rooted in prevention, systemic causes and solutions, safety, and human rights—doing what works to keep all communities safe, prevent harm, and uphold the values of fairness, equal justice, and accountability. Discourse around “second chances,” and discussing crime and drug addiction as public health epidemics reflects this competing narrative. Californians for Safety and Justice and its allies used key elements of this narrative to roll back elements of the state’s devastating “Three Strikes” legislation.

Audiences will interpret the same facts differently, depending on the narrative that is most salient in their minds.

Upon hearing that “African Americans are incarcerated at more than 5 times the rate of whites,” for example, audiences for whom the prevention and equal justice narrative is most prevalent typically conclude that people and policies in the criminal justice system tend to target and treat African Americans more harshly than whites for the same conduct, requiring systemic reform. Audiences for whom the law and order narrative is salient are most likely to conclude that African Americans are more disposed to commit crime, that targeting those communities is therefore justified, and that if any reform is needed, it relates to the personal choices and “culture” of African American individuals and families.

The prevailing narrative, in other words, is a critical driver of public support, activism, and sustainability of changes in policy and practice.

This dynamic plays out on countless issues, from “gun rights” and the Second Amendment, to economic opportunity and poverty, to marriage equality, to reproductive health and rights.

Narrative is different from messaging, sound bites, or slogans.

Whereas an overarching narrative should be relatively stable over time, with the same key values and themes, the specific messages that flow from it will necessarily differ in emphasis, tone and content, depending on the audience, sub-issue, timing, and external events. For example, messaging to “ban the box” by removing questions about criminal convictions from the initial stages of the hiring process might emphasize pragmatic economics and risk reduction with business leaders, redemption and second chances with faith communities, racial equity with civil rights activists, and economic opportunity and dignity with formerly incarcerated people and their families. While those entry points differ, each falls within the “tent pole” narrative themes of pragmatism, preventing harm, and ensuring fairness.

Conversely, messages that fall outside of the narrative tent should be generally be avoided, even if they seem catchy or “test well” in achieving short-term gains. For example, a ban the box message that “these people will be coming back to your communities from prison, so you’d better make sure they can get a job when they do,” plays on fear of the other, undermining dignity and inclusion. Similarly, terms like “ex-con,” “felon,” or “criminal” dehumanize and stigmatize, and should be avoided in favor of, for example, “people returning from prison,” “people with felony convictions,” or, “neighbors/co-workers who’ve paid their debt.”

Shifting Narratives in the 21st Century

Narrative change rarely happens on its own, particularly around contested social justice issues.

It typically results from a sophisticated combination of collaboration, strategic communications tactics, and cultural engagement, all attuned to key audiences and societal trends. It requires both discipline and investment.

The Opportunity Agenda approaches narrative change as a cyclical process that includes: (1) strategy discussions within fields and movements to understand the shared goals and values of proponents and people directly affected, as well as the points on which they differ; (2) communications research on audiences' views, the media environment, and the openings for improving them; and (3) field testing and applying new narratives and messaging in the real world with an eye toward moving hearts, minds, and policy.

The process is a feedback loop because shifting narratives over time requires listening and learning from what is and is not working, and incorporating that back into movement goals, more refined research, and narrative evolution. External circumstances change, moreover, requiring recalibration and, sometimes, reformulation. A human rights narrative that worked before the events of September 11, 2001, for example, would have to evolve in the years immediately after those events. Conversely, a more populist and transformative economic justice narrative became possible after the economic crisis and rising inequality of the last decade. Ignoring those seismic changes risks clinging to a narrative that has become tone deaf or out of date.

A common challenge facing movements engaged in narrative change is the tension between short-term campaign communications and long-term narrative change.

In 2012, for example, the Democratic Party Platform called for “comprehensive immigration reform that brings undocumented immigrants out of the shadows and requires them to get right with the law, learn English, and pay taxes.” That language “tested well”—meaning that it increased support for a pathway to citizenship by around ten percentage points among moderate conservatives—including many in Congress. And some D.C. immigrant rights advocates began using such language, as did President Obama.

But the language was detrimental to a longer-term narrative rooted in the idea that immigrants are a part of us, that they contribute to our economic engine and social fabric, and that the nation's tradition of human rights and due process includes them. It invoked the values of punishment, law, and order, rather than community, opportunity, and pragmatism. What's more, it falsely suggested that a lawful immigration option existed, that undocumented immigrants had to be forced or “required” to pursue it, and that immigrants were shirking taxes and resisting English acquisition—reinforcing the anti-immigrant movement's narrative. Many of us opposed that language as counterproductive at the time, but it was the DREAMers who most vocally rejected it, and who most effectively advanced the more productive narrative, which has emerged as the predominant one within the movement.

That continuing process requires investment and infrastructure. Diverse stakeholders need the time, space, and resources to come together and have candid, often difficult, strategy conversations. It must lift up the voices of people most affected by the issue, who may not be affiliated with traditional organizations, and may not have the time, resources, or personal safety to travel to conferences or other institutionalized convenings. Public opinion, media, and other communications research—though more accessible than in years past—requires funds and expertise. Honing and delivering a compelling narrative to diverse audiences of decision-makers, influencers, and activists requires training and practice to build message discipline. And creating a continuous echo chamber of “on-narrative” messaging attuned to breaking events requires communications staffing, technology, and assets.

Often, the web of investment and infrastructure is best developed through a “hub and spokes” approach at the regional, as well as national, levels. Not every organization will have, or needs to have, a fully staffed and resourced communications department. But those resources must exist within at least a few well-positioned organizations in each region, with the mandate and capacity to work collaboratively with allied leaders and organizations. That requires not only people and dollars, but also the cultural fluency, trust, and inclination to foster collaboration among people who may not see eye-to-eye on policy details.

The criminal justice reform field, for example, includes grassroots activists, policy advocates, reform-minded law enforcement and elected leaders, entertainment and sports figures, faith groups, business and labor leaders, and others, with different entry points and perspectives. Some are particularly concerned about racial justice, while others focus on cost and efficiency, and still others prioritize reducing recidivism. Parts of the sector seek to abolish prisons as we know them, while others aim for a smaller system that is more effective at rehabilitation and redemption.

Moving a shared narrative does not require reconciling those differences, but it does require understanding, respecting, and bridging them through collaborative communication.

Inevitably, there will be disagreements about how to address different issues and audiences while remaining within the narrative “tent poles.” And there will be allies who choose to ignore or circumvent an agreed-upon narrative for strategic or ideological reasons. In the long-term, a participatory, diverse, and inclusive narrative process can withstand those tensions, because it is based on shared values, consensus, and what works. Over time, a strong narrative has its own draw, bringing allies, the media, and even some opponents into its gravitational pull. Bill Clinton’s declaration that “the era of big government is over,” and Lyndon Johnson’s assertion that “we shall overcome,” were watershed moments because they represented the adoption of a movement as part of the mainstream.

The rise in bipartisan support for some aspects of criminal justice reform in the last several years is instructive. Historically low crime rates and diminished fear of crime in most parts of the country, as compared to past decades, softened the ground for a more proactive and fairness-oriented criminal justice reform narrative today. Criminal justice reform movements and leaders have taken advantage of that opening to both activate their base and increase the salience of the fairness narrative among persuadable audiences.

At the same time, reform leaders have worked across ideological divides to gin up support from key elements of the conservative movement and constituency: (1) fiscal hawks who are appalled by the cost and ineffectiveness of America’s over reliance on incarceration; (2) libertarians who are suspicious of government power and believe that laws should restrict people’s freedom only to the extent necessary to prevent harm to others; and (3) Christian conservatives who believe that all people have worth and deserve the opportunity for redemption.

Those perspectives, while supportive of some types of reform, can conflict with more progressive perspectives, as well as with each other. The conservative perspectives, for example, do not typically value racial equity, and often deny that discrimination exists. Fiscal hawks and libertarians support many cost-saving alternatives to incarceration, but often resist supporting the social services necessary to ensure that those alternatives are successful.

This disconnect has played out in the debate over opioid addiction, in which the dominant narrative on both sides of the political aisle has moved toward a beneficial one rooted in prevention, systemic causes, and compassion. At the same time, public concern is overwhelmingly directed at white communities in “Middle America,” with little recognition that similar problems in communities of color have evoked a narrative of punishment, individual blame, and dehumanization. People of color afflicted with addiction have been labeled “junkies” and “crackheads,” in the public discourse, whereas whites struggling with addiction are discussed as neighbors, family members, and victims of an epidemic.

A sophisticated narrative change strategy must navigate these cross-currents and tell a shared story, even as different constituencies hold different priorities, and actively disagree on important points.

Narrative change is not about consensus on every policy detail, but rather agreement on the broad values, themes, and directions that the public discourse and public policy should take. An effective criminal justice reform narrative must be broad enough to convince undecided audiences, activate the base, and diminish the opposition's influence. And it must be specific enough to build support and activism for concrete changes in policy and practice. It must lift up equal justice as a goal, even as proponents may differ about the progress that's been made toward that goal.

History shows us that doing so is possible. Racial justice leaders of the 1950s and early 60s wove together integrationists, black nationalists, white liberals, organized labor, faith constituencies, northern business leaders, and others around a narrative tied to opportunity, human dignity, and human rights, even as those constituencies often differed in their goals, as well as their methods. When necessary, they rode the winds of Cold War competition for hearts and minds, and other dynamics of the day.

The conservative movement also achieved that balance in the wake of its devastating defeat in the 1964 elections. Over a relatively short period, William F. Buckley and other conservative strategists wove together the disparate passions and priorities of fiscal hawks, business conservatives, Christian conservatives, and segregationists to develop a narrative rooted in limited government, personal responsibility, law and order, military might, and dog whistle racism that served that movement's goals for decades. Its leaders stoked and channeled backlash against civil rights gains, economic insecurity, and other concerns to connect with millions of persuadable, mostly white working-class voters.

In each case, narrative victories flowed from a keen understanding of disparate audiences, and a channeling of social and political cross-currents. Importantly, that is different from attempting to reach everyone or persuade "the general public," which is typically destined to fail—no movement has the resources to reach everyone, and not everyone is crucial to victory. Indeed, on some issues, a highly engaged base can be enough to succeed—as when politically-active NRA members mobilize to defeat even modest gun safety legislation that large majorities of voters support. More often, a carefully selected set of base and persuadable audiences hold the keys to success.

The Power of Popular Culture

A less discussed but hugely influential factor in narrative shift is culture. Indeed, nearly every successful movement for social justice in our country has included artists and entertainers among its eloquent voices, and popular culture as a driver of narrative change. Consider the role that Jackie Robinson, Nina Simone, and Harry Belafonte played in the civil rights movement's narrative—as symbols, leaders, and storytellers. Think of the role that shows like *Will & Grace*, *Glee*, and *Modern Family* played in advancing an LGBTQ equity narrative, as did cultural figures like Ellen DeGeneres and Ricky Martin. And, on the conservative side, consider how Clint Eastwood's *Dirty Harry* films and Charlton Heston's NRA leadership contributed to a narrative of "gun rights" as necessary, intensely masculine, and profoundly American.

These cultural contributions to narrative change were the result of cultivation and strategizing between advocates, creatives, organizers, and others.

Harry Belafonte's relationship with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, inspired and equipped him as a civil rights evangelist within and beyond Hollywood. Poet Maya Angelou worked as Northern Coordinator of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Muhammad Ali became a champion of racial justice and black

power under the mentorship of Malcolm X, and singer Nina Simone and Malcolm X were neighbors. Yet, in each case, the artist's unique voice and creative talents were independent drivers of narrative change.

Similarly, today, cultural contributions to narrative change require strategy and relationship-building, paired with respect for creative freedom. The force of NFL players taking a knee for social justice, or of Beyoncé's powerful *Lemonade*, for instance, would be diminished if they were inauthentic or controlled by advocates. At the same time, cultural works and voice have their greatest power when they share core themes and values with movements, and drive fans and followers toward concrete solutions and activism. The proper relationship is nuanced, but potent.

Assessing Progress, Learning from Setbacks

Finally, proper evaluation is crucial to making and sustaining progress in a tumultuous media and political environment. A narrative change strategy should measure activity (convenings, press events, Twitter chats, etc.), reach (news media audiences, Twitter followers), engagement (website visits, event attendance, social media shares, shifts in media coverage), and impact (changes in public opinion, policy, and behavior).

Assessing causation in the communications field is notoriously difficult, and doubly so when the effort involves multiple issues, actors, and locales over time. But the rise of social media has exponentially increased access to data on audiences, public discourse, and behavior.

Developing a culture of open source learning and evidence-based improvement is crucial to success.

The Road Ahead

The current era offers significant challenges, but also huge opportunities for positive narrative change. For the first time in human history, almost all of us have the tools to communicate with millions of people around the country and world, and to hear what they have to say in return. The tools for video storytelling, once out of reach for most social justice organizations, are now in almost everyone's pocket. And interest in narrative change, strategic communications, and cultural strategies in the social justice field is as high as it's ever been.

The progressive narrative emerging in 21st century America has its own pillars. They include the idea that diversity is one of our nation's greatest strengths. That talent and dignity are equally distributed amongst our people, but opportunity and human rights are not. That we're all in it together and share responsibility for the common good. That government should be one of the ways we come together to solve tough problems and establish fair rules. And that people must have an equal voice and an active role in decisions that affect them, as well as the ability to counter corporations and other powerful institutions.

The full story, though, is not yet written.

We've just begun to have the tough conversations, detailed research, and trial and error necessary to a narrative that is true to our values and persuasive to others. The time is right to make narrative change a permanent part of our change strategy, and to tap the tremendous energy, expertise, and genius of our field to make it happen.

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