Harnessing the Power of Narrative for Social Change

The Storytelling Animal

Storytelling has always been central to movement building and successful campaigns. Now in the face of an increasingly complex and fragmented media environment, being strategic about how we tell our stories is more important than ever. Creating a strategy to frame an issue, build an inviting brand and distill our messages into the right memes are critical to helping campaigns generate the critical mass of popular support to win.

There is widespread recognition that progressives need to be better communicators. Unfortunately, communications capacity is often viewed narrowly as a specialized skillset or isolated technical assistance category rather than a unifying strategic approach. As a consequence many progressives still cling to the outdated idea that facts alone are an effective method for persuasion.

Having the facts on our side and defining our policy proposals are very important. However, as cognitive science has shown us, when a fact challenges a cherished, pre-existing belief, the majority of people will dismiss the fact. The facts alone are simply not enough to change hearts and minds. Instead we need to make the important facts meaningful to people in order to make them receptive to new information. The best way to do that is by understanding the power of story. After all, humans are unique in the animal kingdom for our relationship with narrative. We are storytelling animals, meaning that the way we understand the world is through stories.

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The Battle of the Story

Progressives have been so busy winning the battle of the facts in our different issue silos that we’ve been losing the Battle of the Story—the broader frame to fight the big debates and assign relevance and meaning to current events and issues. Whose stories will be heard? Which points of view will become accepted as common sense? Which will not be? What in our world is not worth fighting for? How do we make the future we envision a reality? What are the stories of our values and solutions? Which will be marginalized and dismissed?

There are many different ways to win the Battle of the Story whether it’s by re-framing the issue, amplifying previously unheard voices, or offering new solutions. The story-based strategy approach offers a flexible methodology for campaign or community stakeholders to engage their constituents in shared experiences to make a powerful case for their point of view.

Story-based strategy can be used to deconstruct opposition narratives as well as craft our own stories by focusing on a few key elements of effective social change storytelling.

The Conflict: What is the problem we are addressing? How is it framed? What aspects are emphasized and what is avoided? How can we reframe to highlight our values and solutions?

The Characters: Who are the characters in the story? Do impacted communities get to speak for themselves? Who are cast as villains, victims and heroes?

Show Don’t Tell: What is the imagery of the story? What pictures linger in our minds? How does it engage our values and solutions?

FORESHADOWING: What is our resolution to the conflict? What vision are we offering? How do we make the future we desire seem inevitable?

Assumptions: What must be believed in order to believe the story is “true”? Does our opponent’s story have untested assumptions we can expose and challenge? What assumptions and core values do we share that unite our communities around a common vision?

APPLYING STORY-BASED STRATEGY WITH CALIFORNIA CALLS

With California’s budget crisis in political gridlock in 2010, progressives were focused on communicating the devastating impacts of service cuts. However, the California Alliance, a coalition of community organizing groups anchored by Los Angeles based S.O.P.E., knew that in order to win real tax and fiscal policy reform, they needed to tell a story that could reach a wider audience of Californians. The Center for Story-based Strategy led the coalition through an intensive story-based strategy process to reframe public understanding of the crisis and flesheoal positive futures for shared prosperity. California Alliance embarked on a new narrative with an all new creative, California Calls, which interviewed leaders and community activists engaged in grassroots struggles. We combined our capacity building training program with ongoing partnership, embedded sectoral support and convening our growing network of practitioners.

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One of the most important techniques is to carefully analyze the assumptions underlying competing stories. Progressive communication fails when we leave our most important assumptions—core values like fairness, access to opportunity, community stewardship—out of our story. In the case of challenging a dominant story, whether it’s a deep-seated cultural mythology or the latest corporate PR offensive, exposing the underlying assumptions can highlight contradictions, expose hidden agendas and help us win the Battle of the Story.

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Building a Movement of Storytellers

As strategists and communicators working in grassroots movements, our task is not just to cultivate the best response to public opinion. Our task is to shape public opinion to support real solutions and structural change.

The best way to build this capacity while keeping it anchored in democratic and accountable organizing is to grow it from the ground up. At the Center for Story-based Strategy (formerly smartMeme) we have a decade of experience supporting leaders and communicators actively organizing is to grow it from the ground up. At the Center for Story-based Strategy (formerly smartMeme) we have a decade of experience supporting leaders and communicators actively

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