

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 As a consequence many progressives still cling to the outdated idea that facts alone are an effective method for persuasion.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, constructing our social reality through our ability to create, interpret and contest stories about the world around us.

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 fight to frame 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 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 encapsulate their common experience and vision into a powerful, shared narrative.

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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Story-based strategy offers a participatory framework for coalition partners to create a powerful shared narrative to animate a winning campaign.

THE ELEMENTS OF STORY

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 senses? Is there a potent metaphor that describes the issue?

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 unstated assumptions we can expose and challenge? What assumptions and core values do we share that unite our communities around a common vision?

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Strategies to Shift Culture

Winning fundamental reforms inevitably requires provoking cultural shifts: challenging conventional wisdom and expanding the limits of what's considered politically realistic. Although most progressive campaigns effectively root themselves in a power analysis of economic and political systems, they lack the tools to analyze the narrative components of these same systems we are working to change.

The story-based strategy framework was developed to bridge the gap between messaging and movement building and to provide tools for movement leaders to *change the story* around their issue. The approach is grounded in a *narrative power analysis*—the recognition that every issue already has a web of existing stories and cultural assumptions that frame public understanding. *You Can't Fight City Hall*, *Government Regulations Hurt the Economy*, *Jobs versus the Environment*, *There is No Alternative...* Story-based strategy provides a process to understand the current story around an issue and identify opportunities to change the story with the right framing, messages, messengers and creative interventions.

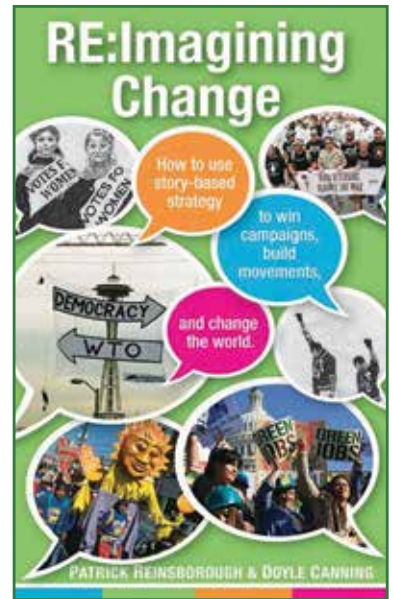
Expanding the progressive narrative to transcend issues and unite sectors will take more than just artful sound bites. It will require a fundamental shift in the way our movements integrate communications. Our movements need the strategic orientation, the skills and the infrastructure to make our truths—about issues like about inequality, racism and environmental destruction—meaningful and resonant in the larger cultural sphere. Even more importantly we need to translate our analysis into compelling narratives inviting our audiences to join us in creating a fairer, saner, hopeful future.

Building a Movement of Storytellers

As strategists and communicators working in grassroots movements, our task is not just to calculate 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 engaged in grassroots struggles. We combine our capacity building training program with ongoing partnership, embedded sectoral support and convening our growing network of practitioners.

Narrative—when harnessed effectively by our movements—is a critical force multiplier to scale up progressive organizing and advocacy. Center for Story-based Strategy is helping build a movement of storytellers with the long-term capacity to capture the public imagination. Because the first step to solving our economic, ecological and social problems is changing the story.



SmartMeme's one-of-a-kind guidebook for activists offers visionary ideas and practical tools to bring the power of narrative into social change strategy.



Story-based strategy trainings encourage paradigm shifting approaches to re-imagining change, while providing grassroots social change leaders with concrete tools and ideas they can implement.

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.C.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 foreshadow a positive future of shared prosperity. California Alliance embodied the new narrative with a name change and became "California Calls: an Alliance to Renew the Dream." By bringing the narrative to life through

their powerful statewide organizing and civic engagement strategy, California Calls helped win the historic November 2012 Prop 30 victory which included the Millionaires Tax. California Calls is continuing to build on their strategy to change the story about tax policy, the role of government and ultimately create progressive reforms that benefit everyone.

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