

# Tacking Into the Winds of Change:

## NARRATIVE STRATEGY FOR BUILDING TRANSFORMATIVE MOVEMENTS



By the *smartMeme* Strategy & Training Project [www.smartmeme.org](http://www.smartmeme.org)

The popular uprising in Egypt used social media to spread tactical information and a unifying narrative that could “break the fear barrier.”

### Lessons from Cairo

**"I knew that if you build a brand you can get people to trust the brand,"**

— Wael Ghonim, *Egyptian activist and creator of online persona “El Shaheed” (The Martyr)*

The seemingly spontaneous, Facebook-fueled uprising in Egypt was the endgame of years of smart organizing. After all, it takes more than a Tweet to turn the oppressive material conditions of poverty and corruption into the launch pad for a transformative movement. A generation of youth activists developed their skills and leadership over time: adapting the theory of strategic nonviolence (as articulated by Gene Sharp), building alliances with organized labor, and exploring new strategies outside of traditional political parties.

These classical elements of a social movement were accelerated and amplified by the effective use of social media. But what made this a revolutionary moment was not the tactical usage of platforms like Facebook and Twitter—but rather how these technologies became a force multiplier for a unifying

narrative strategy. Social media spread video and messaging, and was integrated into Al Jazeera’s coverage of the uprising, so as to create a chorus of the narrative of “Liberation Square” that reached across the world into the west.

There is an ever-evolving ecosystem of applications, outlets, and social networks offering a range of tactics to reach different target audiences. In this increasingly complex and fragmented media environment, we must not confuse tactical tools with an actual strategy. Media tactics – old or new – can only leverage the impact of grassroots organizing when aligned with an effective narrative.

Storytelling has always been central to movement building and successful campaigns, but now being strategic about how we tell our stories is more important than ever. Framing, messaging, building an inviting movement brand and crafting the right memes—or “viral frames,” like the Egyptian uprising’s “We Are All Khaled Said”—is the critical strategy work that determines whether social change vision, demands and mobilizing rhetoric will spread virally across platforms.

### Tacking into the Wind

**A great wind is blowing, and that gives you either imagination or a headache.**

— Catherine the Great

It’s hard to believe that it was only two years ago that millions gathered in Washington for the inauguration with chants of “Yes we did!” 2011 is already roiled in turbulent political winds, with regressive budget cuts, immigrant scapegoating, attacks

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on the rights of women and the attempted roll back of Health Care Reform. The dominant response from the progressive establishment has been to ride the winds of change to the right, and build a cautious strategy disproportionately focused on polling and “messaging to the middle.”

If the Egyptian democracy movement had been relying on the U.S. progressive playbook of 2011, they would have been spending their time and resources doing market segmentation polling with questions like, “Are you ‘somewhat’ concerned about police brutality?” Would carefully selected focus groups in Cairo have approved the message, “Mubarak must go?”

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Egypt’s democracy movement knew that in order to activate the aspirations of the people, they couldn’t rely on a message that spoke to status quo assumptions. The problem for Egypt’s reformers was not a lack of information about their conditions. The barrier was a collectivized fear of the regime. As one of the movement’s key strategists Wael Ghonim describes, they had to “break the fear barrier.”

Likewise, in the U.S. one of the primary barriers to stronger movements is not a lack of information but rather the lack of coherent framing strategies that can challenge the dominant right wing narrative and build a broader progressive base across different issue fights. The current piecemeal, specialized and top-down approach to communications—along with the

siloiing of issues—prevents the overall strategic coordination needed to craft a coherent arc for a meaningful progressive story to move a set of frames across multiple media platforms. To our detriment, progressives have left a narrative vacuum where our movements’ story should be leading the day.

No place is this more painfully obvious than in the ongoing public discourse around the economic crisis. Progressives have always fought for strong regulations and an economy that prioritized the needs of working people over corporate greed. But when Wall Street’s predatory financial speculation blew up our economy, right wing ideologues and corporate apologists drowned out the fact that progressives were right. Remember memes like “Too big to fail” justifying bailouts, and the narrative that blamed the Community Reinvestment Act for the foreclosure crisis?

As strategists and communicators working in social justice movements, our job is not just to calculate the best response to public opinion. Our job is to *shape* public opinion to support real solutions and structural change. To succeed we must develop strategies to reframe the debate and then commit to the time and resources needed to change the story.

## Unfortunately, the Facts Are Not Enough

**There is a world of difference between truth and facts.  
Facts can obscure the truth.**

— Maya Angelou

The Tea Party has shown time and again that they have no regard for facts and have a fairly successful meme machine: Climate change? *It’s a big government conspiracy.* Health care reform? *Death Panels!* Obama? *He is a socialist! Plus, he’s just “different.”* (Psst: *Is he really a Christian? Was he really born in the US?*)

Matters of fact are attacked with an organized right wing narrative strategy. Never mind that the narrative is ripe with contradictions, bankrolled by billionaires, and is designed to play to a base of aging white men with racist assumptions. It’s power is in both the narrative itself, which has had 40 some-odd years of development, and the force-multiplier effect of a right wing infrastructure and corporatized media ecology.

This is the *Battle of the Story*—the wide-ranging fight to frame

*SmartMeme* leads a strategy session with S.C.O.P.E. and the California Alliance to shift the story of the budget crisis and build momentum for progressive reform and a fair tax policy.



The Indigenous Environmental Network produced a daily live webcast from the climate talks in Cancun, Mexico. *SmartMeme* helped IEN integrate their media strategy across platforms and spread the narrative of the "Rights of Mother Earth."

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 conventional wisdom? Which will be marginalized and dismissed? Will collective desire be harnessed for the common good, or hijacked for private gain?

So why haven't progressives built a unifying narrative or invested in the infrastructure to spread it? We contend that one of the most fundamental reasons is a failure to understand the central role of narrative in social change strategy. This failure stems from progressives' outdated attachment to the idea that facts alone are an effective method for persuading someone of a political point of view.

There is a crucial difference between delivering data or analysis, and making meaning in the minds and hearts of human beings. The prevailing tendency in our sector is to emphatically state something factually true, and assume that it will be meaningful and persuasive to our audience. But the innate human capacity for narrative means that our experience of "truth" is much more complex than a rational weighing of the facts. As every advertiser knows, we are guided by our hearts and guts much more than our logical minds. Most importantly, we are deeply influenced by what we already know; our existing frames tend to filter out inconvenient facts that don't reinforce our existing beliefs.

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In other words, while progressives have been busy winning the battle of the facts we've been losing the Battle of the Story. Having the facts on our side and the relevant policy proposals is important but it's just the starting point. Next we need to tell the larger stories that make the truth—the truth about poverty, racism, environmental destruction about the possibility of collective action to create a fairer, saner, better world—meaningful to the people we are trying to reach and resonant in the larger cultural sphere.

To work at the necessary scale, we must get beyond the idea that messaging is a technical assistance category, and



understand narrative as central to an overall social movement strategy. The model of delegating such critical political work to outside experts—in the hopes they will “fix” the way social movements frame issues—has too often sacrificed vision for perceived reach. The result has been a failure to contest dominant frames and a stunting of our collective progress. Instead we need messaging strategies that both challenge the status quo and resonate with a larger audience. To develop these types of transformative narratives requires communicators who are actively embedded in grassroots struggles and can help impacted communities build their story from the bottom up.

### Story-based Strategy: An Invitation for Innovation

If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people together to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.

— Antoine de Saint-Exupery

In *smartMeme*'s eight years of fieldwork we have found that there is a fundamental lack of communications leadership and capacity in the grassroots organizing sector. While many young organizers are “digital natives” who have grown up using online and mobile technologies, and they understand how to communicate in their online environment, they actually often lack the traditional communications and media skills needed to reach beyond their base. At the same time, veteran organizers can easily feel left behind by the fast changing terrain and feel pressure to chase the latest communication technology fad without getting the support to meaningfully integrate it into their organizing strategy.

Kamal Abbas, the General Coordinator of the Centre for Trade Unions and Workers Services in Egypt, told the Wisconsin union protesters, "No one believed that our revolution could succeed against the strongest dictatorship in the region...We stand at your side."

Meanwhile, there is a prevailing lack of literacy about narrative and framing in the sector, combined with a deep hunger for an effective response to the way the right wing is shaping discourse.

In order meet these vast capacity shortfalls, and to satiate the appetite for a more offensive, pro-active strategy to narrate a progressive vision, we will need scale-up. In this day and age every organizer's toolbox and every social change campaign should include an applied understanding of *story-based strategy*: how to analyze dominant culture stories, reframe



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issues, and craft effective messages. Our movements desperately need a ground force of story-based strategists who are both versed in traditional media skills and equipped to experiment with online environments.

If our movements are going to win the Battle of the Story—and create more fertile cultural ground for movement building and organizing—we need to expand our skills, our strategy and our connectivity infrastructure. The best way to build this scale while keeping it anchored in democratic and accountable organizing is to grow it from the ground up. We must invest in helping base building organizations build and integrate communications into their grassroots organizing, resulting in louder voices for justice that can resonate in the popular discourse.

But reclaiming our space in the cultural debate will take even more than skills and sound bites. We're going to need to invest the time and resources into building an "echo effect" of shared frames—spread through coordinated and connective media infrastructure—that can articulate a broader progressive vision across sectors.

We live in fast changing times, and people-powered movements are poised to shatter notions of the politically possible. Indeed, the grassroots uprising spreading out of Wisconsin is a powerful indicator of the potential for new narratives to emerge and unify a broad base. So what does it take for social justice forces in the US to go from a defensive stance to an offensive strategy? How can we build movements to win the Battle of the Story?

Now is the time to experiment and find out. This is a moment to tack into the wind, rather than ride the draft of the right wing narrative. Let's set sail.



**smartMeme**  
Changing the Story ...

### About *smartMeme*

*SmartMeme* is an emerging social change strategy center dedicated to building movements for social and ecological justice with the power of narrative. The organization bridges the gap between strategic communications and grassroots organizing by reimagining methods to achieve fundamental social change with story-based approaches to strategy and framing. Over the past eight years *smartMeme* has trained over 3,000 organizers and partnered with over 100 high impact organizations to frame issues, strengthen alliances and win campaigns. *SmartMeme's* innovative approach is documented in the new book *Re:Imagining Change – How to Use Story-based Strategy to Win Campaigns, Build Movements, and Change the World* (PM Press 2010).

Learn more at: [www.smartmeme.org](http://www.smartmeme.org)