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the power of voice
la fuerza de la voz

TABLE OF CONTENTS

3	An Introduction to Narrative for Social Change
4	The Components of a Social Change Narrative
8	Types of Social Change Narratives
9	Mapping the Existing Narrative Landscape
11	Deconstructing an Existing Narrative Example: A Global Pro-Authoritarian Narrative
15	Articulating a New Social Change Narrative Example: A New Global Pro-Democracy Narrative
18	APPENDIX 1: Narrative Worksheet
20	APPENDIX 2: Narrative Overview Template
21	APPENDIX 3: Narrative in Action
24	APPENDIX 4: About MG/ISMG

Informed by the Field, Research, and Application

Metropolitan Group has been privileged to work as a narrative practitioner in collaboration with change agents, frontline movements, and other practitioners on a range of social impact issues in nearly 30 countries. In 2024, we conducted a literature scan, interviewed narrative practitioners, attended conferences and convenings, and hosted a narrative summit with diverse participants from different sectors, fields, and countries. The updated narrative model shared here has been deeply informed by the collective insights, research, and field testing of narrative initiatives. We share it openly as a resource to help accelerate the effective application of narrative as a lever to advance a more just, healthy, and sustainable world. We are grateful for the experience, expertise, insights, and learnings from the field that have shaped and strengthened this model.

AN INTRODUCTION TO NARRATIVE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

For those seeking to change a status quo rife with inequity and injustice—and to advance a more just, healthy, and sustainable world—narrative can be one of the most powerful tools. That’s because narrative shapes our mindsets, what we see as normative, what we accept without challenge, and what we tolerate (or actively promote and protect) in the systems, policies, and practices that surround and impact us.

The narratives we accept—and the narratives we reject—reveal something about ourselves, the world we experience, and the change we seek to create or the status quo we strive to protect.

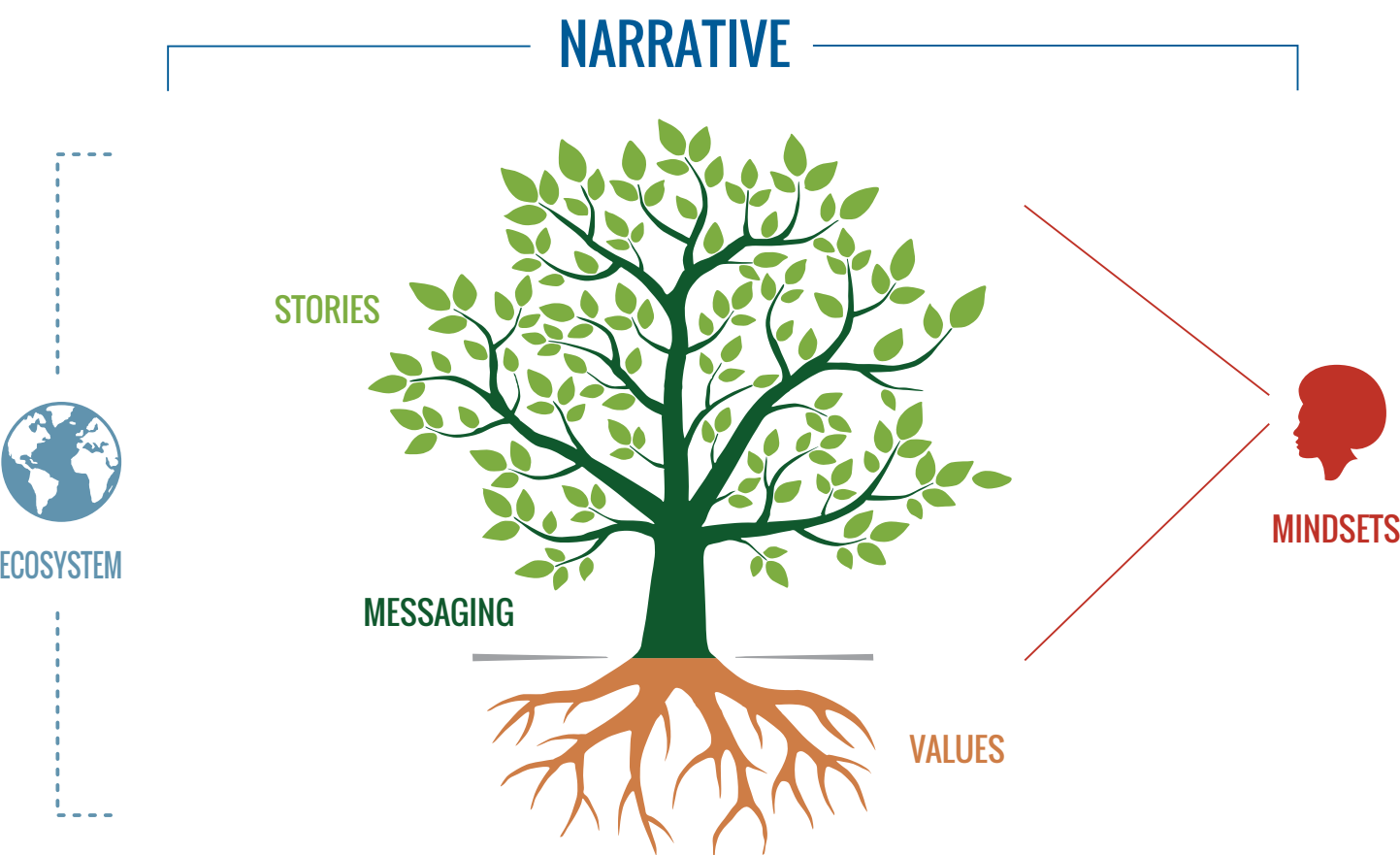
For example, depending on the narratives we embrace, the unprecedented scale of global migration is either a humanitarian crisis that requires compassionate help for displaced people as part of a global community, or a slippery slope that invites disruption and violence into our own countries and dilutes our cultural identity. Public health is either the world’s best hope of achieving lasting health improvements for people, or an invitation for government intrusion in our private lives. Global climate change is either a proven fact requiring urgent and sustained action, or an unsound theory pushed by environmental alarmists and anti-business extremists. And liberal democracy is either the key to freedoms, fairness, and security, or is too slow and messy to meet the challenges of today.

Narratives are often created and maintained to protect entrenched power and privilege. They can also be powerful tools of social change. In both cases, they work because the stories and emotions they stir are more persuasive than an appeal grounded only in facts and data. The arguments in favor of marriage equality, for example, were powerful and persuasive, and many countries around the world took action to recognize and legalize it. But marriage equality only became the law of the land in the United States after the underlying narrative was shifted away from a logic-based argument focused on rights (which was polarizing) toward a focus on the universal value of love.

Narratives can be used to inspire, educate, and lift up, or they can be used to dishearten, mislead, and beat down. The power of dominant narratives represents a major challenge to change agents, just as disrupting and shifting narrative is a powerful opportunity and point of leverage.

Articulating a new (or elevating an existing) values-based narrative—and supporting activists, advocates, and people directly impacted in telling stories that reflect the narrative—can change the public dialogue on an issue. It can also shift power dynamics and drive changes to mindsets, societal expectations, policy, and practice that advance a more just and sustainable world.

THE COMPONENTS OF A SOCIAL CHANGE NARRATIVE



NARRATIVE	The articulation of a particular way of understanding the world and how it works that shapes what people think, believe, and do
STORIES	What people experience over time both literally (e.g., through social media, oral tradition, etc.) and figuratively (e.g., through policy, the built environment, etc.) that aggregates to create or reinforce a particular narrative
MESSAGING	The core ideas that provide the foundational structure for the narrative
VALUES	The deeply held beliefs that ground the narrative; connect it to what people care about; and increase their likelihood of attention, adoption, and action
ECOSYSTEM	The contexts in which people are exposed to narrative, including their environment , lived experience , and the echo chambers through which they receive information
MINDSETS	The collection of perspectives and attitudes that shape people’s receptivity or resistance to narratives and to changes in behavior, social norms, or policies/systems

NARRATIVE

NARRATIVE is the articulation of a particular way of understanding the world and how it works that is accepted as true by a critical mass of people. This understanding informs what we accept as normative, what we think, what we believe, and what we do. The narratives we accept as true also shape our response to our own lived experience, and become narratives that we sustain and advance through our own storytelling.

STORIES

Just as we recognize a tree by the shape created by the massing of its leaves, narratives represent the aggregation of **STORIES** people experience over time. Perhaps because of our deeply embedded associations with the words “narrative” and “stories,” people often think about narrative only in the context of communication and stories in the literal sense. Stories can be experienced literally through oral tradition passed from one generation to another, or via social media posts we scroll through every day. They can be repeated endlessly in our preferred sources of news or reflected in pop culture. But stories can also be experienced figuratively through policies, systems, laws, and the built environment. A stroll through a public park in a country with a monument to an authoritarian leader standing at its center, for example, reflects a narrative about existing power structures and normalizes systemic oppression, just as the monuments to Confederate generals do in front of many public buildings in the Southern United States.

For these reasons, it is essential to think not just of strategic communication as a channel for storytelling, but also to think about ways to use policy, systems, pop culture and art, the built environment, etc. as ways to experience stories that advance a narrative.

Stories can be conveyed in many different ways, including public policy, systems and practices, behaviors, the built environment, and more.

Consider these examples:

- The War on Drugs of the 1980s and 1990s gave rise to mandatory minimum sentences for drug offenses, three-strikes laws, and mass incarceration. In framing addiction as a criminal issue rather than a public health concern, the narrative for this set of policies communicated that drugs are a threat to American society that must be defeated like an enemy combatant. This was then exported to Latin America and the Caribbean.
- The Detroit Urban Farming Movement is a good example of how grassroots initiatives and storytelling about reclaiming abandoned lots in Detroit and converting them to productive urban farms challenged existing mindsets about urban decay, advancing a new narrative about food justice as a critical component of urban renewal policies.
- Women’s reproductive health and rights were limited and often neglected for decades in Latin America, but this started to change with the #MareaVerde (or #GreenWave) in Argentina. Women organized to convey a new narrative about reproductive rights, which triggered new policies in that country and sparked a movement across the region.
- The construction of highways in cities across the country in the decades after World War II was often used to tell the story of American progress and prosperity. At the same time, freeway placement often divided and destroyed thriving Black and immigrant communities while exposing generations to toxic pollutants. These contrasting stories advanced a powerful narrative about who our systems and policies were designed to serve and who they were not.

MESSAGING

While **MESSAGING** can take many forms, it provides the structure for the narrative in the same way the trunk and branches provide the structure for a tree. In a general sense, messaging defines the problem or opportunity, identifies the solution or need for action, describes the solution's benefits, and delivers a call to action to solve the problem or capitalize on the opportunity.

Just as stories are not always communicated literally, the same can be said about messaging. Consider, for example, passage of the Affordable Care Act in 2010, the Supreme Court's decision in 2022 to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, and the more recent dismantling or elimination of regulations designed to reduce industrial emissions that harm our health and damage the environment. Each of these examples is "sending a clear message" grounded in a set of values that can be easily surmised.

VALUES

A tree is grounded in an often complex and expansive root system that provides both its stability and its nourishment. Similarly, the narratives, stories, and messages we experience—both literally and figuratively—are grounded in a set of core **VALUES** that serve the same purpose. Values consist of the deeply held beliefs that connect the narrative to what people care about and increase their likelihood of attention, adoption, and action.

Grounding the narrative and its messaging in core values shapes whether people perceive the suggested solution and actions as relevant or not. In the U.S., for example, the dominant narrative on the issue of guns is grounded in the core values of personal freedom and safety. In this narrative—and the stories it inspires—the messaging is succinctly and memorably reflected in the slogan, "Guns don't kill, people do." Framing the problem in this way focuses public discourse about solutions on the people committing crimes with guns, rather than on guns themselves and the policies that govern their manufacture, sale, and use.



ECOSYSTEM

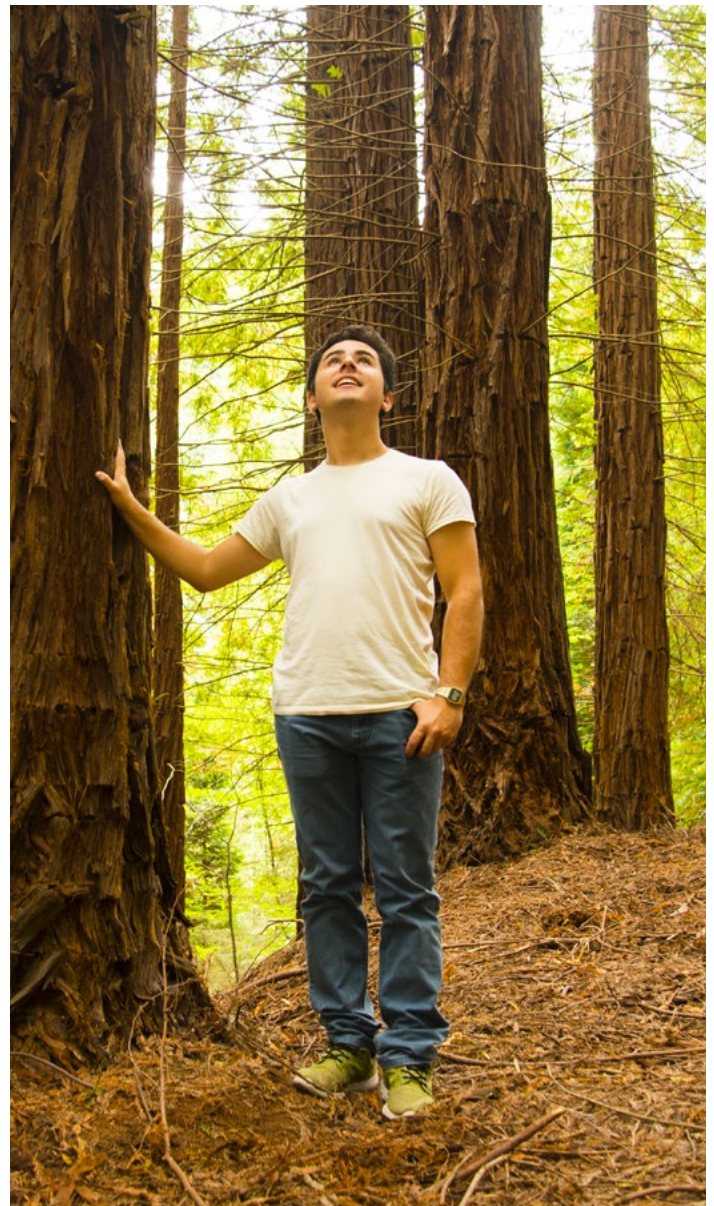
Our consideration of narratives is influenced by the broader **ECOSYSTEM** (or context) in which people are exposed to narrative. This ecosystem includes the **environments** that surround us (both literal and figurative), our lived **experience**, and the **echo chambers** from which we seek information or validation. It is understandable, for example, that a person in Mexico concerned about the level of violence in their country might feel helpless because the vast majority of crimes go unpunished. Having heard endless propaganda disparaging human rights groups for defending the rights of even those accused of a crime, this same Mexican citizen might therefore be inclined to accept the narrative that “human rights defenders protect criminals.” It is no surprise, then, that advancement of a narrative promoting justice in Mexico needs to address fundamental issues of security and living without fear.

This example makes an important point. To be effective in influencing mindsets and inspiring action, a narrative must be reflected in the larger ecosystem. In other words, the narrative must be experienced in the environments that surround us and in the echo chambers on which people rely. Without this, a narrative is likely to be perceived as inauthentic or even false, and consequently rejected.

MINDSETS

MINDSETS are also deeply connected to narratives since they shape people’s **receptivity** or **resistance** to narrative, and their consideration of specific changes in behavior, social norms, or policies and systems. For example, mindsets that prioritize individual liberty and oppose government mandates made public health directives about wearing masks and social distancing during COVID-19 much more difficult.

The interplay between the **ECOSYSTEMS** all around us and the **MINDSETS** we bring to any issue is a powerful reminder that no **NARRATIVE** exists in a vacuum. Every narrative is deeply influenced by—and in turn can influence changes in—the social, cultural, environmental, and political ecosystems all around us. Similarly, while the mindsets people hold shape their receptivity or resistance to narratives, narratives can also influence changes in people’s mindsets.



TYPES OF SOCIAL CHANGE NARRATIVES

Regardless of the worldview they reflect and help to sustain, narratives don't just happen. They initially arise either **organically** or in an **orchestrated** fashion (as shown below). In an orchestrated narrative, a dominant storyteller or group of collaborating storytellers advances a set of stories with the specific intention of advancing a desired outcome they share. Organic narratives, on the other hand, often result from individuals who tell similar stories from their own vantage point without necessarily being consciously motivated by a desire to manifest a particular outcome.

Type of Narrative	Origin	Characteristics	Examples
Orchestrated	Intentionally designed, planned, and advanced by institutions, organizations, or movements	Clear objectives and consistent messaging make it easier to gain traction More easily scalable Risk of being experienced as top-down and/or manipulative unless it generates authentically organic storytelling	Institutions: religion, government, business, media, political parties and candidates, etc. Movements: civil rights, environmental justice, Tea Party, labor unions, etc.
Organic	Individuals tell similar stories from their own vantage point without planning or coordination (at least initially)	Higher levels of authenticity help build trust Can elevate often marginalized voices Risk that lack of direction and consistent messaging makes it harder to gain traction and sustain over time without adopting some elements of orchestration and developing an infrastructure for sustainability	#MeToo, Black Lives Matter, Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), #MareaVerde (Latin America), Madres Buscadoras/Searching Mothers (Mexico)

Regardless of their original source, organic and orchestrated narratives are often interconnected. In fact, the marriage of organic and orchestrated narrative offers the best hope of challenging the status quo and advancing a sustainable counternarrative. Organic narratives can evolve into an orchestrated narrative by the intentional aggregation of individual stories to serve a larger purpose. Consider, for example, how the “Love is love” narrative grew out of organic storytelling in LGBTQ+ communities across the U.S. before evolving and growing as groups like the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), GLAAD, PFLAG, and others provided infrastructure and coordination for advancement of the narrative in pursuit of shared policy agendas, including marriage equality.

At the same time, an orchestrated narrative will be more successful and sustainable if it is building on—or effectively motivates—robust organic storytelling by authentic voices. The *Movimiento por Nuestros Desaparecidos en México*, for example, was initially advanced by formal human rights organizations, creating public platforms for people all over Mexico to share stories of missing loved ones. The movement centered families as truth-seekers and shifted national discourse toward victim-centered justice.

MAPPING THE EXISTING NARRATIVE LANDSCAPE

The first step in advancing a new narrative is to map the existing landscape by asking questions like these:

What are the existing narratives on the issue?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What dominant and salient narratives on this issue are showing up in the landscape review?
What purpose do these narratives serve?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does the narrative strive to do? • Does it protect entrenched power and privilege or promote change?
Where did these narratives come from?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who or what put this narrative forward and why? • To what extent were its origins organic or orchestrated?
How are these narratives advanced and sustained?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who benefits from the reinforcement of this narrative? • What institutions orchestrate it? • What role is being played by organic storytelling? • Who is telling these stories and why?
How effective are these narratives?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How broadly are these narratives being deployed and shared? • How successful are these narratives in driving public discourse and opinion, policy and practice, social norms, etc. • What narratives are effective and need to be amplified?
What opportunities exist to advance a new narrative?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What alternative narratives are being (or have been) attempted? • What opportunities exist to leverage and aggregate existing storytelling at the grassroots level to advance a new counter-narrative? • What influencers or champions might be engaged to help advance a new narrative?

Steps in Mapping the Narrative Landscape

1. Review available research, thought pieces, case studies, and more that describe the existing narrative landscape and assess or evaluate existing narratives.
2. Identify existing narratives and messaging showing up in communication channels:
 - a. Social media posts
 - b. Political discourse analysis of statements, speeches, and online activities originating from a diverse set of leaders and influencers on varying sides of an issue
 - c. Articles published in traditional legacy media outlets
 - d. Content of podcasts, YouTube, TikTok, blogs, and other information consumption platforms
 - e. Pop culture
 - f. ChatGPT and other AI platforms (that reinforce narrative through the aggregation of content)
 - g. Websites of relevant institutions, organizations, etc.
 - h. Other formal and informal channels that reach, engage, and communicate with your audiences
3. Identify existing narratives and messaging reflected in less literal ways:
 - a. Relevant public or private policies (e.g., priorities reflected in funding choices, presence of family leave policies, etc.)
 - b. Existing systems and institutions (e.g., who holds power, the values they reflect in the choices they make, etc.)
 - c. The built environment (e.g., the way communities are designed, access or barriers to infrastructure, transportation, jobs, siting of polluting industries, etc.)
 - d. Social norms (e.g., the attitudes or behaviors that are seen as normative in a community)
4. Interview thought leaders, researchers, practitioners, civil society organizations, and people representing communities impacted by the issue and others. In particular, focus on the existing narratives and messaging they have used or are currently deploying.
5. Conduct original formative research in the form of focus groups and/or surveys.
6. Identify, map, and prioritize stakeholders to understand who impacts and is impacted by the narrative(s) (download stakeholder mapping model [here](#)).
7. To the extent possible, identify which narratives are showing up more frequently than others.
8. Identify the messengers most frequently evoking or disseminating each narrative theme and the dissemination channels they are using.

DECONSTRUCTING AN EXISTING NARRATIVE

Having mapped the narrative landscape and identified those narratives that are most dominant and salient on the issue, the next step is to deconstruct those narratives to better understand them.

This exercise can help understand potential conflicting, contradictory, or oppositional narratives. But, it can also be used to identify the foundational elements of existing organic narratives that are in alignment with your intended social purpose. These existing narratives might provide inspiration and content for development of a new narrative or they might prove (through testing) to be effective to the point that they need only support (or “orchestration”) to gain wider and more consistent use.

The following questions can be used to deconstruct an existing narrative by reviewing and analyzing the content gathered as described above:

What is the theme of this narrative?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is the core takeaway from this narrative?• What understanding of the world does this narrative articulate?
What values ground this narrative?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What core values (e.g., freedom, family, community, fairness, safety, etc.) are evoked by this narrative, and the stories and messaging associated with it?• Which of these values are evoked more frequently and consistently?
What are the core elements of messaging relative to the existing narrative?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How does the narrative define the problem and its solution?• Who does the narrative blame for the problem or hold up as responsible to resolve it?• What actions do these narratives encourage?• To what extent does the messaging align with—or differ from—your own perspective on this issue?
What stories are being told to reflect this narrative?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How is this narrative being advanced through literal storytelling (e.g., via pop culture, political discourse, oral tradition, social media, etc.)?• How is this narrative being advanced through figurative storytelling (e.g., via policy, systems or practice, the built environment, etc.)?

What elements of the ecosystem are relevant to this narrative?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are lived experience, environment (including policy, common practice, built environment, etc.), and echo chambers carrying, reinforcing, and helping to sustain this narrative? • How are existing power structures, systems, policies, and practices defining our lived experience? • How are our environments (built, natural, cultural, interpersonal) reinforcing the narrative? How are the echo chambers we rely on for information and validation (from media to cultural influencers) carrying this narrative?
What mindsets already exist relative to this issue?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does research say about what people think, believe, and do relative to this issue, and why? • What mindsets predispose people to be receptive or resistant to the existing narratives on the issue, and what mindsets might increase their receptivity to a new narrative?

Steps in Deconstructing an Existing Narrative

1. Analyze the data gathered to identify answers to the questions referenced above.
2. Sort the content you've gathered into groupings by narrative theme (e.g., "Democracy is worth fighting for" versus "Democracy promotes equity and fairness").
3. Catalog the core values evoked by the content gathered, making note of the values evoked by each narrative theme. It is likely that some core values will be evoked by multiple narrative themes.
4. Summarize the messaging used to articulate each narrative theme, including: how the messaging defines the problem, challenge, or opportunity; the solution it identifies; the responsibility/blame it assigns; and the calls to action it delivers.
5. Identify the stories, metaphors, and imagery being employed by each narrative theme.
6. Organize the existing narratives in terms of their alignment or differences with your organization's or movement's perspective on the issue and/or desired changes and outcomes.
7. Collaborate with civil society organizations, issue-specific thought leaders, and people with a lived experience of the issue to identify and deconstruct:
 - a. Any existing narratives that might (with or without revision) be considered for elevation and orchestration to increase their reach and effectiveness; and/or
 - b. Any existing narratives that are weaponized, inflict harms, and need to be countered and replaced with community-driven narratives that orchestration can help to advance; and/or
 - c. Gaps in existing narratives that need to be filled by creation of a new narrative, perhaps drawing inspiration or content from existing narratives or messaging.

Example: Deconstructing a global pro-authoritarian narrative

MG was engaged to work in 11 countries on five continents in researching, developing, testing, and planning for deployment of a new narrative to push back against those who seek to undermine liberal democracy and advance authoritarianism. That work included the steps described above, resulting in the identification of seven pro-authoritarian narratives. One of those pro-authoritarian narratives is shown below as an example of how to deconstruct an existing narrative, drawing on a vast global research effort that included surveys, focus groups, key informant interviews, and more.

NARRATIVE		Security justifies all	
MESSAGING (SUMMARY)		VALUES	
<p><i>Briefly summarize the core message to serve as the foundation for storytelling and reflect the narrative.</i></p> <p>Our security is under constant threat—from our borders and physical safety, to our economic stability and our traditions, culture, and values. Democratic institutions are not up to the task of keeping us safe. Our leaders need a heavy hand to solve our country’s problems.</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Safety/security (physical and economic)• Tradition/cultural identity• Strength/fearlessness• Family/belonging• Prosperity	
STORIES			
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dangerous criminals, loss of jobs, and outsiders stories (often tied to immigrant populations)<ul style="list-style-type: none">- “Peruvians are fed up with the aggression of foreigners who are carrying out hired killings, murders, or petty theft.”• Corruption and ineffective leadership by democratic leaders in addressing threats to our security<ul style="list-style-type: none">- “This tragedy once again reminds us of the billions squandered and looted, and the corrupt political factions that have attempted to cover up their failures with cheap theatrics, mocking and disrespecting the Libyan people, while continuing their march of corruption over the bodies of martyrs and innocents, while the army and the people are retrieving bodies with one hand and burying them with the other.”• Cultural and identity politics stories that present perceived criminals, immigrants, and other “outsiders” as destructive forces<ul style="list-style-type: none">- “We are going to continue to confront this cancer, and we have said it before and we stand by it, this war will continue until the gangs are eradicated from the territory of El Salvador.”• Stories of exerting control and using force in the name of protecting the people<ul style="list-style-type: none">- “The situation has gotten out of control. And it is because of the lack of extreme measures ... [the government needs] a firmer hand, to have no mercy, no tolerance or respect for the human rights of criminals.”- “Human rights workers are preoccupied with the health and life of the criminals, drug pushers, and drug lords, but the leader of this country has the duty to protect every man, woman, and child.”- “Your concern is human rights, mine is human lives.”			

ECOSYSTEM

- In-depth scans in 11 countries on five continents identified a set of salient and dominant global narratives that occur across very different country contexts, political cultures, and social-historical experiences.
- Globally, pro-authoritarian narratives dominate the upstream landscape, vastly overwhelming pro-democracy narratives.
- Pro-authoritarian narratives are orchestrated and supported by a massive and coordinated infrastructure, including state-run media.
- Pro-authoritarian messengers are using anti-corruption narratives to erode trust in politics, government, and governing institutions.

MINDSETS

- One-third of people surveyed globally say having the army rule or a leader who “does not bother” with parliament or elections is a good way of running a country.¹
- One-in-five people surveyed globally believe authoritarian countries are more capable of delivering “what citizens want.”²
- Nearly one in three people globally (31%) believe authoritarian countries are better than democratic countries at growing the economy, and 37% believe authoritarian countries are better at keeping crime low.³



¹Open Society Foundations, Open Society Barometer: Can Democracy Deliver? (Open Societies Foundations, 2023), 16.

²Ibid., 11.

³Ibid., 11.

ARTICULATING A NEW SOCIAL CHANGE NARRATIVE

Having completed the narrative landscape review and deconstructed any existing narratives on the issue, it is possible you will identify elements of existing narratives (or even entire narratives and message frameworks) that are performing effectively and need only support or orchestration to expand their reach and exposure. It is also possible you will identify a narrative vacuum or gap that requires articulation of a new social change narrative. In that event, ask yourself the following questions:

Are any existing narratives serving your intended purpose?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do any of the existing narratives align with your intended purpose, evoke core values you share, and/or define the problem and solution in ways with which you agree? • If so, what adjustments (if any) might be necessary to bring the existing narrative into closer alignment?
What elements of existing narratives are working or not working well?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What core values or elements of existing messaging are working well (e.g., garnering attention, conveying relevance, raising the issue as a priority, and/or activating your intended stakeholders) and might be appropriate to serve as inspiration for a new narrative? • What core values or elements of existing messaging are not working well and ought to be avoided—or significantly refined—in articulating a new narrative?
What gaps exist in the existing narrative landscape?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where might there be opportunities to inject a new narrative into the landscape on this issue? • What would this new narrative need to be, do, or accomplish more effectively than the existing narrative(s) on this issue?
What components need to be present in a new narrative?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What core values will most effectively ground a new narrative? • How should the problem, challenge, opportunity, or need be framed? • What solution(s) should be identified? Note that these solutions should be tested for actual and perceived relevance in addressing the problem, challenge, opportunity, or need. • What benefits of the solution are recognized as being possible and would be valued by the audience you seek to reach and engage? • Who should be identified as having responsibility to address the issue, and what actions do you want them to take?

Steps in Articulating a New Social Change Narrative

1. Informed by stakeholder input, identify and prioritize the core values the new narrative should evoke.
2. Identify existing and/or develop new hypothesis narrative frames and messaging components for testing, with content specifically designed to evoke prioritized core values found through research to be positively connected to the issue at hand.
3. Test the narrative frames and messaging using qualitative (e.g., focus groups and interviews) and quantitative (e.g., surveys, A/B and forced-choice testing) research methodologies.
4. Analyze data from the testing phase (which might involve more than one round of testing) to see what works and what does not in generating increases in engagement, understanding, and motivation for action.
5. Iterate the narrative frames and messaging content between rounds of testing and at the end of testing to arrive at final recommendations for the narrative and messaging to be deployed.

Example: A New Global Pro-Democracy Narrative

Below is an example of the core elements of a new social change narrative. This example is provided as a counterpoint to the narrative deconstruction shown on page 13. This narrative was developed in collaboration with partners in three countries (El Salvador, Indonesia, and Serbia) and validated through extensive research, including surveys, focus groups, and key informant interviews.

NARRATIVE

Freedom and democracy live in all of us.

MESSAGING (SUMMARY)

All people deserve to be both free and secure. True security is only possible when we all can live and speak freely, honor our traditions, and provide for our families. Freedom is both our right and a responsibility we share to participate and to respect the freedom of others. Freedom and democracy live in all of us. We expect and deserve an honest and open government that answers to the people and treats everyone fairly. When we stand together for freedom and democracy, we build strong communities and a safer world.

VALUES

- Freedom
- Fairness
- Safety/Security
- Representation
- Tradition
- Fairness
- Honesty
- Family/Belonging
- Responsibility
- Strength/Fearlessness

STORIES

- Reaffirming the ways in which democracy is part of the historical and cultural fabric of the country
- Stories illustrating the benefits and impact of honest and open government, and how leaders are being held accountable for it
- Stories of people working together successfully to stand up for freedom and democracy
- Demonstrating, in plain language and with tangible examples, how separation of powers, due process, and other liberal democratic principles work and advance freedom for all
- Stories showing that strong leadership respects freedom and human rights for all, and strong democracies are able to encourage and withstand criticism
- Stories illustrating how authoritarianism is incapable of protecting freedom in any authentic way or of delivering what people need and value in their own lives

ECOSYSTEM

- The brand and word “democracy” is powerful and holds value, and as a result is vulnerable to being co-opted by authoritarians.
- Many pro-democracy narratives use technical language and assume relevance and understanding of liberal democratic principles, while pro-authoritarian narratives center to a greater extent on triggering values and highlighting benefits.
- Despite “freedom” being identified as the value most associated with democracy, the “Democracy promotes freedom” narrative has lost dominance in recent years and was not found among the current salient and dominant pro-democratic narratives employed globally.
- Some of the most dominant pro-democracy narratives have “deficit framing” (e.g., “Democracy is messy”) that can reinforce concerns about stability and security that further advance authoritarian narratives.

MINDSETS

- The number one value most authentically associated with democracy is freedom.
- Eighty-six percent of global survey respondents say they want to live in a democratic state.⁴
- Presented with 10 imperatives like building schools and hospitals, protecting the environment, and reducing crime, those surveyed strongly say authoritarian regimes are less able than democracies to fulfill these needs.⁵
- Shown a list of nine major countries and asked which most align with their values, respondents are most likely to pick democracies, and most frequently the United States.⁶

⁴Open Society Foundations, Open Society Barometer: Can Democracy Deliver? (Open Societies Foundation, 2023), 16.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Open Society Foundations, 3.

APPENDIX 1: Narrative Worksheet

This worksheet can help guide the process of deconstructing an existing narrative and/or gathering the data, ideas, and insights to inform the articulation of a new narrative. The content of this worksheet can then be condensed down for inclusion in the Narrative Overview in Appendix 2.

ECOSYSTEM

Insert key aspects of the context in which people will be exposed to the narrative, including their environment, lived experience, and echo chambers.

MINDSETS

Briefly summarize here the existing perspectives and attitudes that shape people’s understanding of the issue.

VALUES

List the core values most likely to be effective in connecting this issue with what people care about.

MESSAGING

Briefly summarize the core message to serve as the foundation for storytelling and reflect the narrative. You might wish to organize your messaging as follows: 1) Problem/opportunity/need; 2) Solution; 3) Benefits of the solution; and 4) Assignment of responsibility and delivery of a call to action.

What is the problem, opportunity, or need?

What is the solution to the problem, opportunity, or need?

What are the benefits of this solution (to people, their communities, their country, etc.)?

Who is responsible for making this solution happen?

What do you want or need people to do in helping to manifest the solution?

STORIES

Insert examples here of the kinds of stories you want people to experience both literally and figuratively. Be sure to include storytelling that occurs through policy, systems, the built environment, etc.

NARRATIVE

Articulate the key idea you want people to remember when they think about this issue. Inspired by the Messaging section above, it should be short and simply constructed for easier retention, and should evoke the top core values that root the narrative.

APPENDIX 2: Narrative Overview Template

NARRATIVE

Insert the key idea you want people to remember when they think about this issue. It should be short and simply constructed for easier retention, and evoke the top core values that root the narrative.

MESSAGING (SUMMARY)

Briefly summarize the core message to serve as the foundation for storytelling and reflect the narrative.

VALUES

List the core values most likely to be effective in connecting this issue with what people care about.

STORIES

Insert examples here of the kinds of stories you want people to experience both literally and figuratively. Be sure to include storytelling that occurs through policy, systems, the built environment, etc.

ECOSYSTEM

Insert key aspects of the context in which people will be exposed to the narrative, including their environment, lived experience, and echo chambers.

MINDSETS

Briefly summarize here the existing perspectives and attitudes that shape people's understanding of the issue.

APPENDIX 3: Narrative in Action



CLIMATE JUSTICE

Advancing climate justice in a divided nation

Our worsening climate impacts all of us, but not in the same ways. The challenges are compounded by generations of policies and practices that exposed people and communities of color to higher risks. MG worked with the Kresge Foundation to support its Climate Change, Health & Equity (CCHE) grantees and partners in shifting the narrative on climate change in ways that center climate justice and health equity. This resulted in a new [narrative and message frame](#) designed to aid community advocates, health care institutions, and practitioners in talking about structural racism with

their elected officials, including those who are not yet ready to do so. Through ongoing communication technical assistance and capacity building, MG supported Kresge's grantee partners in applying this messaging, resulting in elevation of their work and receipt of multimillion-dollar federal grants.

FREEDOM MATTERS

Promoting democracy at home and around the world

Since 2022, MG has been working globally to identify, map, and deconstruct dominant and salient narratives that advance the principles of liberal democracy, and narratives that seek to undermine it or to explicitly promote authoritarianism. That work has included research to examine the core values reflected in this range of narratives and to identify those values that are more widely associated with—and authentic to—democracy. It also included development and testing of alternative narratives to increase understanding of and support for the principles of liberal democracy, as well as social and behavior change analysis of effective methods to deploy these narratives. The work was intentionally focused on a diverse set of 12 countries on five continents, including the United States. Research and Resources are available at [Democracy Narratives in Action](#).



JUSTICE WE CAN TRUST

Combating corruption and impunity in Mexico

Corruption, impunity, and violence are longstanding realities throughout Mexico. Human rights groups sought a new narrative and support to better use strategic communication as a social change tool. Since 2017, Metropolitan Group and our Mexico-based sister company, Impacto Social Metropolitan Group (with funding from the Ford Foundation), have partnered with civil society, policymakers, influencers, and the creative and arts community to create and apply a groundbreaking narrative change initiative to address corruption and impunity in Mexico.

The initiative has engaged millions of people and mobilized thousands through campaigns that promote justice, the rule of law, and civil society activism, and it has increased understanding of impunity as a justice issue.

ADVANCING EQUITABLE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Inspiring action to address structural racism as a leading barrier to health

Shifting the narrative on who has access to health and well-being, who does not, and why, is key to moving from individual blame and deservingness to collective, societal action. Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF)—the U.S.’s largest health-focused philanthropy—worked with MG, as part of a team led by Lake Research Partners, to develop durable and persuasive messages, metaphors, and visual cues to communicate about the connection between racism and health, the persistent structural barriers to a Culture of Health, and the opportunity to build new bridges in place of barriers. All assets are available on the RWJF website [resource page](#), including an [animated video](#) MG created that links message and visual metaphor. The video and tools have been widely disseminated and are free and available for broad use.



RESETTING THE TABLE

Transforming the U.S. Food System

The Rockefeller Foundation engaged MG to research and design an initiative to help accelerate transforming the food system in the United States to make it healthier, more equitable, more resilient, and more sustainable. Our work included national formative research and development of a new national narrative to advance equity, health, environmental sustainability, and resiliency in the U.S. food system. The resulting evidence-based narrative and messaging was shared with the field and the public in [Reset the Table: Messaging Guide](#)—which was

written and designed by MG—with specific guidance and supporting research to help systems change advocates in all sectors and at all levels promote transformation of the U.S. food system. MG also developed [Reset the Table: Meeting the Moment to Transform the U.S. Food System](#), which outlines a series of fundamental shifts and near-term steps to effectively promote healthy people and a healthy planet.

CLEAN ENERGY

Framing the narrative to translate support into action

While the issue of climate change is politically polarizing in the U.S., policies and practices aimed at facilitating the transition from dirty to clean sources of energy—a core strategy to address climate change—typically generate wide bipartisan support. Yet the advancement of such policies and practices was not succeeding to the extent necessary in part because advocates for clean energy tended to frame their narrative around the polarizing issue of climate change and the need to mitigate against it. MG and the Sierra Club designed Ready for 100, a long-term strategy grounded in three interlocking approaches: inspiring a national narrative making the case for the transition to clean and renewable energy; convincing key institutions to make policy and systems changes that lead to 100% clean and renewable energy by 2050; and contributing to a broader and more diverse movement to advance an equitable transition to clean and renewable energy for all. Today, one in four people in the United States lives in a community committed to a transition to 100% clean, renewable energy.





SUPPORTING HEALTHY KIDS

Finding common ground on public health policies

Voices for Healthy Kids, an American Heart Association program that advances state and local policy, recognized that policies intended to increase health equity sometimes missed the mark because they were too broadly written to make direct impact in communities experiencing the greatest disparities. In advancing health policies, advocates often face both strategic and personal challenges when engaging with elected officials who hold differing views on public health policies. Finding and building on shared values and common ground can advance solutions, build longer-term understanding and collaboration, and support advocates to care for their own needs, feelings, and sense of safety. To support its grantees in doing this, MG produced a narrative framework, message guide, and training program. Our research-driven guide, [Finding Commonalities and Solutions With Decision-Makers](#), and training on its use, helps advocates assess decision-makers' mindsets and priorities, and explore, in less polarizing ways, policies that support children and families.

NATIVE TRUTH

Reclaiming the narrative about Native peoples in the United States

The dominant narrative about Native Americans in the U.S. is often filled with negative stereotypes and misperceptions that rely on inaccurate history, romanticized notions, racist assumptions, and/or erasure of Native peoples. Even well-meaning allies—including organizations serving Native Americans—often unintentionally spread this false narrative by focusing on deficits rather than assets in an attempt to build urgency and support for funding, policies, and programs. MG was privileged to collaborate on Reclaiming Native Truth, the largest public opinion research and strategy-setting project ever conducted by and for Native peoples. We worked with stakeholders across Indian Country to create and test a new narrative, design a narrative change strategy, and develop [message guides](#) for Native peoples and organizations—as well as non-Native allies—who want to apply the new narrative in their work.



PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR THE ARTS

Arts and creativity strengthen our nation

The National Assembly of State Art Agencies (NASAA) understood the need to create a lasting narrative that would help make the case for public funding for the arts as part of a continuing effort to broaden political will for arts, culture, and creativity. MG worked with NASAA to conduct formative research, draft and test narrative and message concepts, and develop and roll out a [new advocacy narrative](#) designed to shift arts advocacy messaging and support advocates in deploying it. The key message communicated: Arts and

creativity make us stronger—as individuals, families, communities, states, and as a country. They are a backbone of innovation, prosperity, and thriving people and places. Public funding for arts and creativity is a high-return investment that benefits every American in every city, town, and rural community nationwide. This narrative has been applied by arts, culture, and creative expression advocates in every region of the country, and has successfully blocked reductions in arts budgets and won restoration of and increases in funding.

APPENDIX 4: About MG/ISMG

We are inspired by people and communities working to build a more just, healthy, and sustainable world. We exist to amplify the power of their voices.

We do that in two ways. We serve as a strategic and creative resource to change agents by designing, implementing, and evaluating campaigns and initiatives that change narratives, attitudes, behaviors, practices, and policies. And we build the capacity of change agents, ensuring that they have the strategies, relationships, tools, infrastructure, and organizational culture needed to achieve positive impact.

Metropolitan Group (MG) and its sister company, Impacto Social Metropolitan Group (ISMG), are full-service, strategic, and creative global agencies that research, design, test, implement, and evaluate social impact initiatives. MG/ISMG develops and iterates innovative models on the impacts of narratives and social norms on changes in policy, practice, behavior, attitudes, and culture.

Our recent narrative work domestically and globally has included researching, developing, testing, and/or implementing new narratives to:

- Promote democracy and address rising authoritarianism in 13 countries on five continents, including North America
- Address structural racism, advance environmental justice, promote reproductive freedom, increase health equity, and support healthy and sustainable food systems in the U.S.
- Counter impunity and corruption, defend civic space, advance gender equity, address gender violence, and bolster support for addressing gross human rights violations in Mexico.
- Advance women's rights in Tunisia.
- Promote democracy and defend civic space in El Salvador.
- Advance adoption of clean and renewable energy standards in the U.S. and Europe.
- Shift health expectation norms and policies in the U.S. to a community-of-health framework.

With more than 35 years of experience driving innovation in the social purpose sector, we are committed to authentic, collaborative engagement with clients and stakeholders, and to crafting tailored strategies that meet their unique needs.

Select Agency Clients

American Heart Association
American Public Health Association
Children's Advocacy Centers of Texas
Deep South Center for Environmental Justice
Environmental Defense Fund
First Nations Development Institute
Ford Foundation
MacArthur Foundation
Power to Decide
NASA Earth Sciences Division
Natural Resources Defense Council
National Democratic Institute
National Immigration Forum
National Park Foundation
National Wildlife Federation
Nuclear Threat Initiative
Oregon Health Authority
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
Sierra Club
The Menopause Society
The Nature Conservancy
The Rockefeller Foundation
U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)
U.S. Forest Service
W.K. Kellogg Foundation

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