

How do other fields think about narrative?

Lessons for narrative change practitioners

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Introduction

Insights about narrative can be found in a wide variety of places, including sources that narrative change practitioners do not typically look at. This report, sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, looks beyond the fields usually consulted by the activists, advocates, researchers, and strategists engaged in narrative change work to glean new insights about narrative that can enrich and enhance the narrative change field.¹

To learn what these other fields have to tell us, FrameWorks researchers conducted interviews with luminaries from four fields that aren't frequently consulted by those engaged in narrative change work: marketing and advertising, entertainment media/narrative arts, psychoanalysis, and technology (including its use in disinformation and dissemination of conspiracy theories). Below is a list of the people with whom we spoke—we are grateful for their expertise and insights:

- Annette Insdorf, Film Studies, Columbia University
- Beth Comstock, corporate executive and author of *Imagine It Forward*
- Bill Hirst, Psychology, New School for Social Research
- Francesca Tripodi, Center for Information Technology and Public Life, University of North Carolina
- David Henry Hwang, playwright and screenwriter, including Tony Award Winner *M. Butterfly*
- Gretchen Barton, Research Director, Future Majority
- Heidi Hackemer, Creative Director (North America), Oatly
- James Krantz, Principal, WorkLab
- Mike Rothschild, author, including *The Storm is Upon Us: How QAnon Became a Movement, Cult, and Conspiracy Theory of Everything*
- Parul Bansal, Psychology, Delhi University
- Renee DiResta, Technical Research Manager, Stanford Internet Observatory

- Robert McKee, creator of the Story Seminar and author, including *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*
- Seth Godin, founder of Akimbo and author, including *This Is Marketing*
- Susan Choi, novelist, including National Book Award Winner *Trust Exercise*
- Tony Kushner, playwright and screenwriter, including Pulitzer Prize Winner *Angels in America*
- Warren Leight, playwright and screenwriter, including showrunner for *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*

We complemented these interviews with a review of literature in the four fields. Below, we summarize the key learnings that emerged from this process and identify eight lessons that can be used in narrative change efforts.

Eight Lessons

#1: EMPATHY.

Create relatable and authentic characters to generate empathy and engagement.

Empathy—the ability to understand and share the feelings of others—helps people become emotionally involved in a story that otherwise might not have struck a chord with them. Characters who are relatable and authentic help generate empathy from the audience, which pulls them into the story. Critically, when people can relate to characters who are different from themselves, it can shift and broaden their perspective—which is critical for social change. While this insight is storytelling common sense, because social change practitioners are focused on the content of their cause, they don't always pay sufficient attention to creating well-rounded, authentic characters.

Empathy, which is created through strong characters, gets people to engage with a story in a fuller way. Creatives whom we interviewed in entertainment media and the narrative arts emphasized the importance of well-written characters in creating a personal connection between the story and the audience. People respond to relatable characters—they like to be able to “see themselves” in a character to feel invested in their journey. However, several creatives stressed that, for this to happen, characters do not need to share all, or even many, traits with the audience. Rather, characters only need to feel authentic for the audience to empathize with them. When a character feels authentic and is presented as a “three-dimensional” human being, it makes it easier for the audience to go beneath the character's surface-level traits and identify with the character's “emotional needs and wants,” providing a universal connection.

“You see a show about a different culture or people from a different country or whatever. The thing that makes it specific are the different cultural details. Maybe they’re speaking a different language. Maybe they eat different foods. Maybe they have a different approach toward emotionality and the thing that makes it universal is, the extent that the artist who creates it is able to dive down into those details with the requisite amount of truth and heart, therefore those characters become three dimensional. They become people. They ultimately have the same emotional needs and wants that an audience member—that any audience member or at least most audience members—should be able to identify with and that gives them the universality.”

David Henry Hwang

Empathy can also help an audience shift its perspective. When people are able to empathize with characters who appear to be different from them on the surface, they learn that they can relate to people from different social groups. Comedians have found that sharing their individual stories is an effective way of creating empathy across differences. In *A Comedian and an Activist Walk into a Bar*, Katy Borum Chattoo and Lauren Feldman (2020) found that “Some comedians recognized that sharing their personal stories has a humanizing effect, helping to create a point of connection and build empathy, even across lines of difference” (p. 148). Comedians of color have also found that offering personal stories can help a broad audience identify with their desires and needs, which—as noted above—helps the audience relate to the universal human experience below the surface (Chattoo & Feldman, 2020).

Advertising also uses relatable characters to generate empathy. The most powerful ads present stories and characters that the audience can identify with (Kissell, 2019). When ads have a strong story arc and a relatable character, viewers are able to emotionally identify with a character’s problem. When the brand’s product is presented as the solution to this problem, the audience is more likely to buy the product because they are vicariously living through the main character’s story arc and can see themselves in the same position.

Marketers use the idea of *narrative transportation* to understand how effective ads persuade viewers. Narrative transportation occurs when a story resonates so much with an audience that they lose themselves in it (Green & Brock, 2000). The more fully transported people are by a story, the more they will view the protagonist favorably and have a strong emotional response (Green & Brock, 2000), making them more likely to buy a product.

What does this mean for narrative change work?

Establishing empathy through relatable and authentic characters pulls people into the narrative and allows it to be heard and processed. For a story to work, it needs to connect with the audience through its characters. Creating a strong emotional connection with an audience will make them more receptive to a narrative—and less likely to resist or dispute arguments being offered.

Well-written characters also enable people to develop empathy for those who are different from them. If advocates or activists are trying to engage audiences other than the groups being spoken about in the story, empathy is key.

How to put this into practice:

- **Create** relatable characters so that the audience empathizes with their stories.
- **Embrace** difference by letting a character’s distinctiveness shine—this will lead to a feeling of authenticity in a character and story and result in greater engagement with the story.
- **Situate** individual stories in context, to help people see characters’ problems and aspirations as emblematic of broader social issues.

#2: MOMENTUM.

Create narrative momentum with actionable stories that inspire engagement.

Momentum—the desire to know “what happens next” in a story—is what makes an audience want to hear more, causing them to stay engaged and motivated to keep listening. Momentum can also lead to a desire among the audience to get involved in an issue—they can continue the story through their own actions.

Nearly every creative we interviewed named momentum as a central part of storytelling. In an interview, playwright David Henry Hwang describes this as the “forward motion” of the narrative, which is crucial to keep a reader or observer engaged, whether it be in a story or even an essay:

“If you’re watching something, you’re very interested in how that story is going to turn out. You move through time more energetically and so, therefore, even when I’m writing an essay or something, I tend to want to think about that task in terms of narrative. How can I keep the forward motion? How can I keep the story compelling?”

David Henry Hwang

One source of momentum in a narrative is compelling consequences. Playwright Tony Kushner explained the power of compelling narratives to show us the consequences and the “path of truth”:

“They’ll remind us that there are consequences to everything, and that if we’re going to try to extract meaning from existence, we have to be able to follow these wherever they lead us, and try very, very hard to stay on what feels, to the best of our abilities, like the path of truth.”

Tony Kushner

Momentum can build desire among an audience to get involved in a narrative themselves. Clear action steps help the audience see what novelist Susan Choi described as a “narrative of possibility.” Once people hear about a problem, they need to know that there’s something they can do about it. Choi gave the example of the climate crisis—climate narratives should tell people what can be done and how they can get involved after the problem has been outlined.

“Every once in a while, I’ll hear somebody saying, ‘If we just do this...’, and I’ll perk up like, What, if we just do what? What is it? Can I do it? Will it actually make a difference? And so, again, back to that feeling that there has to be a narrative of possibility. And that people feel like they can see themselves in it.”

Susan Choi

Choi connects the idea of momentum to the point above about the importance of empathy: If an audience can see themselves reflected in a narrative, they will feel more capable of “keeping the narrative going” themselves by taking direct action.

Coupled with characters who inspire empathy, momentum and clear action steps motivate people to want to become part of the story themselves.

What does this mean for narrative change work?

Narratives that have *momentum* are able to pull people in and get them to stay for the whole story, allowing the narrative to be received. Without momentum, a narrative cannot be effective because it will not keep the audience engaged and generate a sense of investment.

Momentum can also counter fatalism by providing people with a motivating sense that they can do something. By communicating action steps in the context of an emotionally meaningful narrative, activists and advocates can mobilize people. Climate activist Greta Thunberg’s “School Strike for Climate” is a great example of this. She furthers the narrative around youth and climate by providing a clear action item for students to participate in: a school strike—often on coordinated days globally—to advocate for *their* future. This action item brings young people into the narrative by making them characters who come together to demand change.

How to put this into practice:

- **Build** momentum in a narrative by providing action steps and showing clear consequences so that the audience stays invested in the story.
- **Provide** participatory action steps on what needs to be done or how to get involved that fit with the narrative, such as voting, looking out for a neighbor, showing up to a protest, or a reposting an image or message on social media.

#3: COMPLEXITY.

Engage the complexity of issues before challenging people’s beliefs.

Just as well-written characters create authenticity, so too do stories that let the complexity of an issue come through. Social life is messy, and social issues have lots of facets and features. Stories that let these facets come through are more likely to be effective in persuading people. Stories told as part of social change efforts will, to be sure, try to get people to see an issue from a particular perspective, but if they simplify issues in a way that’s not true to real life, they are less likely to be effective. In other words, to shift audiences’ thinking, it’s important to avoid flattening the issue.

On one level, letting the messiness of life come through is important because it is interesting. When talking about their own work, creatives—in particular novelists and playwrights—emphasized that exploring the complexity of an issue can engage audiences. Playwright Tony

Kushner explained that when he writes, he chooses topics that challenge him because the process of discovering characters, plots, and morals as he writes his plays makes the art more complex and more “real” to the people who hear it:

“I feel very strongly that the only way you can ever hope to be interesting to anyone, especially to an audience of hundreds of people a night, is if you’re going into a place where you don’t know the answers, and asking questions that you don’t have answers to, but that you need to have answers to. Even if you fail to answer them, which you most likely will do, you maybe will help refine the questions. [...] You’re creating critical consciousness. You’re creating a kind of mind that is able to regard reality with complete investment and with complete skepticism at the same time, and to understand—to maintain faith with reality and community while at the same time being able to continue to ask the necessary questions about it, and recognize the processes of artifice that are always present in human consciousness and in human experience of the world.”

Tony Kushner

Yet complexity isn’t just important for engaging audiences but also for persuading them. Creatives explained that stories that allow the complexity of an issue to come through are more persuasive than oversimplified ones. They argued that the audience should be encouraged to see the complexity of an issue *before* being asked to make a judgment. This approach creates an opening for people to change their mind without feeling like they are being told what to do or pushed to adopt a certain perspective. This is a necessary step before people can be persuaded to accept new ideas:

“You don’t want people to feel attacked. If you go at things too hard—and I’m guilty of this sometimes—it turns people off. Preachiness lands flat. I’ve sometimes found that asking people what they think instead of telling them what to think is the better approach. Essentially walking with people instead of standing above people can be effective.”

Warren Leight

This is not to suggest that stories shouldn’t have a moral or take a stand, but simply that they are more likely to be effective in changing people’s perspectives if they open space to recognize the messiness of life before they suggest a lesson. Creatives who were interviewed explained how stories, particularly those intended for social change, need to convey an overall moral without seeming “condescending” to an audience. Creatives noted that it is important not to “talk down” to people because when the “moral” of a story is being dictated to them frontally, the audience becomes less receptive to it and even likely to reject it.

Marketer Seth Godin has a similar approach to changing people's views without making them defensive. He advocates for bringing out nuances that people might not have seen before as a way of shifting their thinking, rather than directly questioning their beliefs (Godin, 2005). He explains that the most successful marketing strategies try to connect a story with an audience's existing worldview. The logic behind this tactic is that people do not want to change their worldview, rather they want to "feel smart and secure" and have their worldview reinforced:

"Great stories agree with our worldview. The best stories don't teach people anything new. Instead, the best stories agree with what the audience already believes and make the members of the audience feel smart and secure when reminded how right they were in the first place." (Godin, 2005, p.13)

What does this mean for narrative change work?

Telling stories that engage the complexity of an issue can help open minds without making people feel defensive, disrupting old ideas and creating receptivity to new ones. While stories in some media may need to be more direct, there is value, when possible, in allowing the messiness of social life to come through before introducing a lesson. This point is important for less receptive audiences who are more likely to become defensive.

Godin's marketing idea—that narratives should highlight nuance *instead of* challenging people's existing worldviews, rather than *as a way to* challenge them—has mixed implications for social change work. In an interview with us, Godin made the case that the key to this approach is getting people to see they were "right all along":

"I think real social change happens when we say to people 'You were right all along, you don't have to change your worldview, it's just you might have misinterpreted a couple of facts along the way, but now you can remind yourself that you are right all along.' [...] They don't have to shift their worldview, they just have to say, 'This new set of facts enables me to take a new set of actions.' And in my experience, just about every significant social change has occurred because the people who finally supported it were able to tell themselves they were right all along."

Seth Godin

There is obvious tension here with the goal of narrative change work, which is to shift people's perspectives in deeper and more durable ways. Playing to people's existing worldviews threatens to reinforce precisely those views that narrative change practitioners are looking

to shift. That said, in many cases it may be possible to highlight that new narratives are grounded in at least some part—if not, perhaps, the most prominent parts—of people’s existing perspectives. Helping people see the through line between their past views and new ones may very well make it easier for them to adopt new ideas.

How to put this into practice:

- **Allow** the complexity of issues to come through to fully engage audiences.
- **Introduce** lessons as a second step, after acknowledging that the issue is complicated, when dealing with potentially resistant audiences.
- **Build** on the productive aspects of an audience’s existing thinking to help people see their connection to new ideas.

#4: EXPERIENCE.

Create a shared experience among an audience to foster a feeling of belonging.

Narratives are a tool for “meaning making” that allows us to sort events, people, and places into larger patterns we can understand. Effective narratives can be unifying—they have the power to create a shared experience among a specific audience and foster a feeling of belonging. Greta Thunberg’s “School Strike for Climate” mentioned above is a great example of this. By mobilizing around school strikes to highlight the impact of climate change on their generation, youth develop a shared sense of belonging in protesting climate change with their peers.

Creatives whom we interviewed explained that their ultimate goal in creating stories tends to be for the audience to have a common experience that connects them to one another, even if they do not walk away with identical takeaways. Tony Kushner described this as the “penny drop” moment in a play, movie, or other creative work, where everyone in an audience realizes they are feeling the exact same thing:

“In many really, really good plays or great plays, there’s a thing that happens at some point—usually, it’s at least past the midway point of the story that you’re telling—that I call the “penny-drop moment.” [...] Everything just sort of snaps into focus all at once... everybody suddenly realizes—or at least, in the most important, profoundest sense—we’ve all been hearing the same thing. It’s a moment of absolute communality. We all get to experience being part of a hive mind, even if it’s just for a second.”

Tony Kushner

Narratives give us a sense of what the world is about and where we fit into it. When this happens with a group of people, it can foster a sense of belonging. James Krantz, an organizational consultant specializing in systems psychodynamics, noted that for people to feel like they are a part of a group, they must share a common narrative. To illustrate this point, he gave the example of six sunbathers at a beach who are not a group to start, but they become one if they see someone drowning and come together to intervene:

“They become a group and they have a shared purpose. In that shared purpose, there’s an underlying interconnection between people, often unconscious, which has a profound effect on their capacity to work together.”

James Krantz

Psychoanalysts emphasize that a shared narrative gains power when it taps into an unmet emotional need and the desire to belong, which explains why conspiracy theories can be so powerful. For instance, QAnon conspiracies may resonate with someone who feels isolated from society and desires to belong in a community. Conspiracy theories unify people around a common enemy. Mike Rothschild, an expert on conspiracy theories, compared this to the common experience of watching a movie or sporting event with a group of people; when people share the “story” with others (for instance, in message boards and live chats), they feel more invested and experience a sense of belonging.

What does this mean for narrative change work?

Effective narratives can generate a sense of shared experience, belonging, and solidarity. Shared experience is powerful and can motivate people and make them feel more capable of tackling an issue. We can see this in direct action efforts such as the one mentioned above—Greta Thunberg’s “School Strike for Climate.” There are many other examples of how collective experiences are being used to propel narrative change, such as attending Black Lives Matter protests, using Instagram profile photo filters that support equality, or putting up a yard sign

declaring that “Science is real.” While in-person experiences are the most powerful way to create a shared experience, these examples show that experiences do not need to happen in physical proximity to others or at the same time to create a sense of belonging.

How to put this into practice:

- **Curate** in-person group experiences such as film screenings to create shared meaning among a group of individuals.
- **Create** virtual experiences such as online talks or mission-driven performances that can create shared meaning among a dispersed group of individuals.
- **Develop** direct action asks that enable individuals to participate in a narrative but with the knowledge that others are doing the same to foster a sense of shared experience. Direct actions like posting yard signs or creating social media posts involve a public commitment that can create a feeling of shared experience.

#5: PARTICIPATION.

Target early adopters who can help spread the narrative.

Narratives can be effectively spread by early adopters who participate in their dissemination. Early adopters of a new narrative can become evangelists who help to get it out to the world. Groups of people such as identity or interest communities and movement builders are particularly powerful in disseminating a narrative. The effects of early adopters are amplified by social media, which makes it easy for people to participate and to help spread a narrative.

Early adopters is a term used by technology marketers and refers to individuals who will jump at the opportunity to consume a new item (e.g., the DVD, iPhone, Bitcoin) ahead of the mass market curve. Everett Rogers (1962) argues that when early adopters buy into ideas or products, they decrease uncertainty in the idea or product and subsequently inspire the mainstream to buy into it. Seth Godin (2005) advocates for marketers to avoid marketing to the masses and, instead, focus on people at the start of the bell curve. The advantage of marketing to early adopters is that they become evangelists of a product and will do the marketing for a product because they believe in it deeply.

Marketing to early adopters is strategic because they have the power to spread the word in their communities and take a product to the mainstream. Rogers (1962) argues that early adopters tend to be highly regarded by their peers, often with more advanced education and social status than the mainstream, so when they talk, the masses listen. As Godin (2005) explains, early

adopters are part of a specific community and “what makes them a community is that they talk to each other. They share ideas and adjust their biases and choices based on what other members of the community do” (p. 68). In an interview, Seth Godin gave the example of Bitcoin—when it first started, only a specific group of individuals were buying it. However, it has recently gained more traction by word of mouth from the original early adopters, now reaching the ears (and wallets) of a wider audience.

Similar to marketers, creatives in the social impact documentary space have used teams of “movement builders” as early adopters to participate in amplifying their work. In *Story Movements*, Katy Borum Chattoo (2020) explores how independent storytellers or “impact producers” harness the power of the documentary medium to change policy. Key strategies are involved in this work, from the content of the narrative—highlighting the lived experiences of individuals and marginalized communities to show that social problems are not political abstractions—to dissemination activities, like grassroots or community screenings that teams of movement builders leverage to make change happen. These teams are made up of a variety of entities from civic connectors and impact strategists to institutions that provide them with funding. The teams help turn a movie into a movement and have a direct impact on policy by forming “policy subnetworks” that include legislative staffers, filmmakers, researchers, advocacy groups, and often policymakers themselves.

Social media has made narratives more “participatory” by enabling early adopters, communities, and movement builders to participate in the dissemination of narratives. The rise of social media has allowed more people to make their voices heard and shape narratives around a given issue. By telling their own stories, and spreading others’, people become an active part of constructing and disseminating narratives. In this way, technology allows a modified version of the oral tradition, where everyone adds to a story by telling it rather than having it hierarchically imposed upon them. Renee DiResta, an expert in disinformation, explained this phenomenon:

“People have always shared stories among communities, such as by telling a story to someone in the next village over that they see at the pub. The process of social sharing on social media is related to that dynamic of oral tradition in the sense that one person sees a story in one of their Facebook groups that’s related to vaccines, then goes and shares the post into their political Facebook group, maybe their Bernie Sanders Supporters Facebook group. And someone in that political group then goes and pushes the original story out to one of *their* groups, maybe the New Canaan Community Chat group, so all of a sudden that group is talking about the vaccine-related story too.”

Renee DiResta

Social media provides a way for people to participate in a narrative and creates repetition, which is necessary to spread a narrative. Marketing experts whom we interviewed stressed the importance of repeating a story “over and over” to make it stick with an audience. Beth Comstock explained that often the issue with messaging isn’t that people do not understand it, but rather that they do not remember it after they’ve heard it once:

“You can’t assume that just because people are up for the change that they’ve bought in and they believe it, and that you’re continually refreshing it. So, you just have to continually say your story over and over again.”

Beth Comstock

What does this mean for narrative change work?

Narrative change strategists can leverage audience participation to disseminate narratives. A great example of the power of participation in narrative change work is the #MeToo Movement, which has relied on similar stories of sexual harassment and assault told by many different women. The impact that this repetition has had on the narrative of sexual assault is undeniable—it has helped create a collective understanding of the scope of the problem and led to shifts in our cultural understanding of sexual harassment and assault. In an interview, Renee DiResta explained how narratives will gain a wider range if the individuals who hear a narrative are able to become messengers themselves:

“There are top-down dynamics, in which one person with a large audience, an influencer or a media figure, is telling something to a lot of other people who then pick up the thing and share it on, spreading that unit of content. But the other way that things spread on social networks is simple peer-to-peer transmission. Someone writes a post, or makes a meme, or shares a long-form article, and it’s just spread from person to person in groups where people are congregating. It’s a much more democratized bottom-up, personalized process in that sense.”

Renee DiResta

Just as early adopters can help get the word out about a product, early adopters of a new narrative can help to catalyze narrative change.

How to put this into practice:

- **Target** early adopters to participate in the dissemination of a new narrative to get the narrative out to the broader public.
- **Reach** community members who will multiply the narrative through their own community networks.
- **Encourage** people to share stories with others to increase their sense of investment in an issue and to ensure repetition.

#6: ATTENTION. Don't forget to grab your audience's attention.

Narratives and stories are only effective if they have the audience's attention. While this point is obvious, it's also easy to forget. Advocates and activists are sometimes so focused on the content of what they're trying to get across and convinced of its obvious importance that they forget to engage audiences who aren't already concerned.

As Heidi Hackemer explained in an interview, the private and nonprofit sectors often start from different assumptions when it comes to audience engagement—the private sector assumes no one cares, while the nonprofit sector assumes that people already care:

“When you're working in the private sector, you assume that nobody cares what you have to say. And you have to work really hard using tools of creativity to get people to pay attention to something like toothpaste or a can of sugar water, right? The nonprofit sector, an activist, they assume that people care as much as they do. And so, I would say without a doubt without exception, every time that I've walked into a nonprofit, the first order of business that I have to do is give them a hierarchy of their story and say, 'You cannot flood people from the first get-go.' You have to have the introduction that allows a lot of people to get curious and engaged.”

Heidi Hackemer

In the private sector, marketers tend to focus most of their effort on this initial attention capture, assuming that otherwise people will quickly glance over and then ignore the material in question. In his book *Pre-Suasion*, Robert Cialdini (2016) argues that the public sector tends to assume an audience is invested in its message rather than trying to “sell” them on it first. His theory is built around the idea of anchoring—an attentional bias where people rely heavily on the first piece of information offered—and priming—which is when people's responses are biased by what they've just been exposed to.

What does this mean for narrative change work?

Advocates and activists can't forget about the need to grab an audience's attention. When narrative change work assumes that people are paying attention and just need to be persuaded, it is likely to fail to engage people at all.

Developing a hook to bring in an audience is critical to make sure they're paying attention and will hear the full story or narrative. The hook does the work of anchoring and priming an audience to be ready for a new story or narrative.

How to put this into practice:

- **Assume** that the audience doesn't already care. Engaging the audience is always important.
- **Focus** on grabbing the audience's attention with an introduction to the issue that makes people curious and gets them to engage with the issue.

#7. ASPIRATION.

Paint an aspirational vision of “what could be” to overcome fatalism and mobilize people.

Narratives are particularly powerful when they are aspirational; that is, they envision a different—and better—alternate reality. Aspirational narratives can create a collective sense of investment by presenting “what could be,” creating an opening to mobilize people to work toward this different reality and overcome fatalism in the process.

Marketers often pull people into a brand narrative by using products as an aspirational symbol of who the viewer wishes to become. When people are buying a product, they are investing in an aspirational vision of themselves. Beth Comstock distinguished her work from what she tends to see in the narrative change space by explaining that she focuses on not what has been done but what could be. As an example, she explained that a company can discuss its plans to build a rocket to go to Mars and people can be inspired by it even if the “result” does not yet exist.

What does this mean for narrative change work?

Instead of focusing on what is broken, aspirational narratives provide a path forward that emphasizes “what could be.” This focus on a different reality has a mobilizing effect on an audience, inspiring them to invest in the “possibility” of a future solution, even if it has yet to be designed or attempted.

Several narrative change experts who were interviewed for a related project highlighted how social change narratives are often centered on resistance, involving a protagonist who is up against something. Cristina Uribe suggested framing narratives in terms of what is possible, not in terms of beating the odds, which only serves to reinforce what is currently broken. Instead, start from a space of possibility by showing what change produces.

“I think so much of our comfort in narrative arc is around resistance, and we need to get that part of it is not being the underdog, or not just resisting, but telling the narrative arc includes what that change is or what it looks like.”

Cristina Uribe¹

How to put this into practice:

- **Focus** on a vision of “what could be” to inspire people to invest in change.
- **Show** what change looks like so people have an aspirational goal in mind.

#8. DISTANCE.

Create distance between people’s beliefs and identity to enable self-preservation.

Creating psychological distance between people’s beliefs and their identity allows them to be receptive to change without injuring their ego. It provides them a chance for self-preservation—they have the space to change their minds without seeing this as a rejection of their basic sense of self. This opportunity for self-preservation makes people more receptive to change and avoids turning them off when confronting a tough subject or new point of view.

Narrative therapy provides a blueprint for how to create psychological distance and enable changes in thinking. The narrative therapy approach (White & Epston, 1990) was created to enable patients to deal with their problems in an empowering way. The approach allows therapists to help people externalize sensitive issues. Through story, patients are able to objectify their problems and reflect on them from a distance. Objectifying an issue is thought to lower a person’s resistance and defenses, allowing them to address the issue in a more productive way. Once people see a problem as separate from their identity, this creates an opportunity for change. Narrative therapists work with patients to build “alternative

storylines,” which allow patients to imagine how they could rewrite their story in a new direction. These new storylines help them envision a future that retains its connection to their identity and past but that doesn’t repeat past problems.

What does this mean for narrative change work?

At its core, narrative change work is concerned with changing the way people think. Creating psychological distance provides an opening for people to change their viewpoints and increases receptivity to new ideas. Narrative change practitioners can use story to enable communities to reflect on their experiences in a new way. And by helping audiences envision alternative storylines—new ways of continuing their story that help to bring about positive social change—they can help audiences shift their thinking and behavior in productive directions.

How to put this into practice:

- **Distinguish** between past actions and identity. In telling stories about past mistakes or harms, talk about what was done without ascribing this to people’s character or identity. This can help create the distance for people to reflect critically.
- **Introduce** new narratives as alternative storylines to help people see themselves in change.

Endnotes

1. Views expressed here do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the foundation.
2. This interview was conducted as part of a project to develop a model of narrative form. See FrameWorks Institute. (2021). *The Features of Narratives: A Model of Narrative Form for Social Change Efforts*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

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The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multidisciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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How do other fields think about narrative?

Lessons for narrative change practitioners

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