the case for Explanatory Stories

the art of STORYTELLING

Communicators for social change are moving from a phase of fascination with story into an era of creative adaptation.

But how exactly are NGOs to tell better stories about the work they do, the issues they confront and the policies they champion? What is a story, anyway? How does it work? Are there different ways to tell stories, and different types of stories? Are some stories better than others for social change?

To inform and deepen this important pivot from inspiration to implementation, I draw on the research and perspective of the FrameWorks Institute to reconsider the very architecture of a narrative, bringing to bear nearly two decades of research on how people think about social issues to evaluate social change storytelling. I then offer a set of recommendations for building better social change narratives.

One of the biggest challenges we face as social justice storytellers is adapting a canon of thought based on "adult narratives of personal experience" into societal narratives of collective experience. That process begins with understanding and adapting the architecture of story. Linguist William Labov has enumerated and discussed an architecture of narrative that includes six parts:

Abstract—what the story is about

Orientation—who, what, when, where

Complicating Action—what happened, i.e. the plot

Evaluation—what this means

Result—what finally happened

Coda (optional)—summary, return to normal

But understanding the parts and sequence of a story is not enough to deliver a social change narrative.

If we rely on our default understandings of narrative to fill in the blanks, we will end up telling stories of individuals who succeed or fail based on their choices and effort.

In research with more than 500,000 participants across a wide variety of social issues, FrameWorks researchers find Individualism to be among the deepest, most pervasive and stubborn cultural models that Americans hold, shaping thinking about a vast array of social issues from aging to housing and public safety.

Relying on our storytelling instincts, we get a narrative package that sounds something like this: In the poorest section of San Diego (orientation), a young Latina and her small family are trying to evade the authorities in pursuit of a better life (complicating action), and have crafted a temporary reprieve from danger in a small shelter where they celebrated the daughter's fourth birthday.

This is the familiar, dominant narrative —what author Kurt Vonnegut has called a "man in the hole" story—in support of which so much of our narrative energies are directed. It is endlessly satisfying because it is familiar, easy to craft and appears to be empathic.

In fact, you do not even have to supply the individual actor—because the individual story is so well-known that people infer it. Asked why people cannot find affordable quality housing, Americans readily volunteer the explanation that people should stop making poor decisions, find better housing and stop asking other people to pay for it. When asked to explain how crime happens, FrameWorks' participants explain crime as the result of a rational decision process and crimes are perpetrated when benefits outweigh risks.

By contrast, an explanatory story bends the narrative arc toward social justice by using tested frame elements that reliably redirect our attention to the social systems and structures that need to be fixed.

You can see the difference in the frame effects. In a recent survey experiment, FrameWorks compared people's policy thinking after exposure to a conventional story about an individual with the frame effects of an explanatory story.

conventional story

The conventional story featured Maria, a woman without dental insurance whose oral health declined because she was unable to afford treatment.

The individual story had no distinguishable effect on the public's sense of collective responsibility.

explanatory story

The explanatory story included the story of Maria, but also explained the systemic causes of her situation and named potential policy solutions.

The explanatory story had statistically significant positive effects, making people see a clear role for public systems and policies to address the issue at hand. This experimental research is consistent with a long history of scholarship documenting the counter-effects of human interest stories on public thinking and social policy support.

STORYPOINT

SOCIAL CHANGE REQUIRES THAT WE TELL STORIES THAT WORK AGAINST THE GRAIN AND OPEN OUR ABILITY TO THINK ABOUT SOLUTIONS AT NEW LEVELS AND IN NEW WAYS.

Why is telling individual stories so easy while telling alternative stories often sounds awkward to our ears? We are evolutionarily predisposed to focus our attention on the ways issues arise and are solved at the individual level.

Social change requires that we tell stories that work against the grain and open our ability to think about solutions at new levels and in new ways. We can take heart from the effects of these "odd" narratives. In an experiment testing the power of various narratives on support for social policy on aging issues, FrameWorks found that, by featuring systems as characters and explaining how issues work, these explanatory stories were able to reduce implicit bias against older adults by as much as 30 percent.

A story on criminal justice reform following this narrative arc might read like this: Our criminal justice system needs common sense solutions if we are to decrease crime, enhance public safety and make better use of our resources. (Orientation) Just as we need to use different gears when driving or biking on a hill, our criminal justice system should use different resources for different situations. Right now, we are stuck in the prison gear. (Complicating Action) For the system to work well, we need to be able to shift gears to mental health treatment, addiction services and age-appropriate responses for children and adolescents.

The explanatory story, consistent with the real-world analysis of most social justice advocates, focuses on systems and mechanisms that must work efficiently and fairly to advance our values. Complications in the plot come not from deficiencies of character in either the hero or the villain but from structures and systems that are not being maintained or continue to embed and reproduce historic injustice. The fact that systems of distribution have been corrupted or corroded is placed front and center in this narrative strategy while issues of character and effort are contextualized and put in the background.

What is striking about this formula is its easy adaptation to frame elements that have a proven impact on precisely these cognitive tasks. Research allows us to populate the narrative arc with "frame

elements" that suit the job description of the various "chapters" within the narrative arc—the kinds of frame elements that FrameWorks tests every day on social issues: Values, Explanatory Metaphors, Explanatory Chains and Collective Solutions.

Can you use these templates to tell stories that appeal and stick in old and new mediums? We think so. FrameWorks has used this narrative outline to help create everything from documentary films to state and federal legislation to original virtual reality experiences. Once advocates open their minds to these different kinds of stories, they often find them organically aligned with their preferred policy solutions, making them easier to tell. And explanatory stories come with two added benefits: first, they can be verified through empirical research. That is, you can "build" these stories by using research methods from the social sciences. Second, the revised narrative arc is inherently corrective. If you follow it, it will prevent you from defaulting to the individual-focused narrative.

If we want better stories for social change, we must retool the architecture of storytelling to get more of the "social" into the story.

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