Spotlight On
Impact Storytelling

Mapping and recommendations for the narrative and cultural strategies ecosystem

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TL;DR

In deference to one of the key, if meta, observations of this report — i.e., there are just too darn many reports in the world — we're going to cut to the chase and start with a "too long; didn't read" section that simply lists our key recommendations. If we want to leverage the promise of narrative and cultural strategies to make the world a better place, we need to invest in the following:

1. MORE COORDINATION, PRODUCTION, AND DISTRIBUTION OF IMPACT STORYTELLING!

We've invested a lot in theory and research, but not nearly enough on coordinating, developing, testing, and optimizing "impact storytelling" — defined as intentional, strategic storytelling designed to advance social impact goals. It is crucial that we produce and distribute these stories at scale, which means thousands and thousands (maybe millions) of connected stories. This includes better leveraging of the media and entertainment industries, so it's about both what we produce and how (and what) we influence commercial entities to produce.

2. MORE TRAINING, MORE TALENT!

To help solve looming leadership and practitioner pipeline challenges and to grow the work, we need to create standards in curricula and uplift best practices … and maybe even start a certificate program.

3. MORE PRACTICAL, USEFUL, AND AFFORDABLE RESEARCH AND MEASUREMENT!

We already know a lot about audiences and measurement and "what works" — but too often that knowledge is isolated, highly academic, and technical. We urgently need to reorient our research and measurement so that what we produce is practical, affordable, accessible, and equitable. We need less research on theory and top-down narrative design and more performance and measurement tools and analytics.

4. MORE SPACES FOR COORDINATION AND COLLECTIVE LEARNING!

There is a constant and clear call that we need more coordination infrastructure to help build relationships and trust; to co-create shared strategy, standards, and practices; to build better coordination and collaborations; and to ensure that we aren't missing opportunities because the right people and organizations aren't appropriately resourced to do critical components of the work.

5. MORE ABUNDANT, MORE EFFICIENT, MORE STRATEGIC FUNDING!

We need funding geared towards the particular needs of narrative and culture, such as the ability to fund collaborative efforts and to fund more types of change agents with longer timelines, different deliverables, etc. And instead of the $50K project-based grants that are common today, we need much, much bigger, multi-year general operating grants.

HELLO!

We are not neutral, disinterested reporters. We name our chief bias freely: we are narrative and cultural strategy super fans. We believe these are among the most potent tools available to advance social justice. Narrative and culture work are not just focused on change but on transformational change that builds collective power and creates a more liberating, just, welcoming, and beautiful world. Or, as Anat Shenker-Osorio put it during our interview, **"To help make people's lives better … or at least slightly less shit, as fast as we can, as much as we can."**

Given the multiple urgencies of the times we are living in — as well as the increasing interest and investment in the rapidly growing, truly dynamic fields that utilize narrative and cultural strategies (which we call *the ecosystem*) — we believe now is the right time, and an opportune time, to take stock and offer suggestions for how all of us working together can do more and do better going forward.

> "This is a beautiful moment to say look at how far we've come, look at how much work has been accomplished, look at the leadership and understanding of the role of culture in our design to achieve our goals. We've come a long way, and now it's time to really dig deeper."
>
> – Ellen Friedman, former Executive Director, Compton Foundation

We offer this report to help those of us in the ecosystem see and understand ourselves: our roles, our relationships to one another, our strengths, and the opportunities we have to make improvements that will result in greater impact. We also hope this report will help funders better and more strategically invest their time, talent, and treasure in supporting this ecosystem to achieve its aims. Finally, we hope the content of this report helps spark conversations about how to build on our successes and address our challenges.

Our methodology for this report included reading and analyzing several dozen articles and reports on narrative and cultural change. We then interviewed eighteen practitioners, researchers, and funders who have been critical to the development of the practice and invited a group of eight practitioners to participate as readers and thought partners (all are listed in the acknowledgements). And, of course, we brought our own professional and lived experiences and perspectives to bear in our analysis. Given the various inputs to this report, we have done our best to call out the instances where our analysis is new or different from what we heard from others so as to be clear about what parts of our analysis represent our own opinions or thinking versus the ecosystem's consensus.

Of course every project has its boundaries and limitations. Our focus is on those aspects of narrative and cultural strategy that social justice philanthropy regularly invests in in the US. We intentionally do not cover work taking place abroad or in areas like academia, government, the performing and visual arts, political campaigns, and more. We further limited our scope to organizations doing or supporting what we call "impact storytelling," which is intentional, strategic storytelling designed to advance social impact goals — or, put succinctly, storytelling with a purpose and not just story for story's sake.

With that scope in mind, here is what you will find in the following pages:

- **NARRATIVE & CULTURAL STRATEGY TODAY**, which covers general areas of agreement about concepts relating to contemporary narrative and cultural strategy, a discussion of some points of divergence, some commonly used terminology, and, finally, a few examples to bring the basic ideas to life;

- **A MAP OF THE ECOSYSTEM**, which offers our framework for looking at the roles and relationships of the key activities and types of organizations that populate the ecosystem;

- **OBSERVATIONS & ASSESSMENT**, which synthesizes the strengths of the ecosystem and its opportunities for improvements;

- **RECOMMENDATIONS**, summarized in the TL;DR section above, and expanded here with greater detail and practical next steps;

- **TOWARD THE FUTURE**, where we offer thoughts on where we go from here; and

- **APPENDICES**, where we provide deeper information about our research methodology, including our scope of inquiry and the interview questions we used, further descriptive information about a number of example organizations (note: this is not an exhaustive list!), and a bibliography containing all the materials we consulted in producing this report.

Happy reading! Thank you for joining us.

Erin Potts   Dom Lowell   Liz Manne

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About the Authors

ERIN POTTS is a consultant who uses her twenty-five years of bringing together culture and social justice to help others do the same.

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NARRATIVE & CULTURAL STRATEGY TODAY

POINTS OF CONVERGENCE

Almost every report we read and every interview we conducted described a lack of clarity or alignment around the terms that define this kind of work. To quote Jeff Chang, **"The praxis has developed really fast, but what we've found is we're not using all the same language even."**

We have heard this same frustration over many years of doing this work … and have occasionally voiced it ourselves. But in the course of working on this report, we found significant improvements. We were pleased to hear plenty of convergence about fundamental elements of narrative and cultural strategies, particularly alignment on shared goals, motivations, and values, and an abiding belief in the power role of storytelling — and storytellers — in expressing our values and achieving our aims. So, without any kind of official coordinating body or a deliberate process of alignment, we found this wide-ranging, multidisciplinary community shared much common ground with respect to:

- The better world where we need to be headed (goals);
- The people and communities whose needs and goals should be centered in the work, specifically those who have historically experienced and continue to experience the greatest harms in our society (motivation);
- The social justice principles we live by, things like anti-racism, inclusivity, equity, access, safety, and more (values);
- The powerful tool employed to achieve our aims (storytelling);
- The special role filled by artists, other creatives, producers, and cultural organizers, who are uniquely gifted and skilled in envisioning a better world and building demand for it, given their abilities as storytellers and their often deep and abiding connections with their audiences (storytellers); and
- The very long time that this kind of work often takes (timeline).

WHY STORYTELLING IS ALWAYS CENTRAL

A number of sources pointed to the reasons why storytelling is so essential to narrative and cultural strategies. The Science of Winning with Stories, for example, citing neuroscience and other fields, describes the basis of the unparalleled power of stories, explaining that stories use emotion and engage the unconscious, where most decisions are made, and that stories can literally rewire our brains and reshape memories, whereas facts and logic cannot.

Jeff Chang says that when it comes to narrative and cultural strategy, **"Story is the essential unit of change."** And Jason Rzepka adds that transmitting (and transforming) culture is largely done through stories.

So story — and the narrative and cultural strategies that produce stories for social justice (what we call "impact storytelling") — present a formidable tool at a moment when the moral arc of the universe could really use some help to bend more quickly towards justice.

NARRATIVE STRATEGY OPERATES VIA MANY PATHS

Amongst the areas of convergence we found, there is a broad sense that narrative can and should operate through all of our traditional social justice practices: public advocacy, communications, and field organizing. And there is a growing belief that one of the less traditional social justice practices where it can most easily create change at scale is through cultural organizing. As Jeff Chang, Liz Manne, Erin Potts, and wrote in A Conversation About Cultural Strategy, "Over the long term, cultural strategy cracks open, reimagines and rewrites fiercely-held narratives, transforming the shared spaces and norms that make up culture." While policy and politics sometimes gives us a narrow range of what is currently practical and possible and focuses on incremental change, art and storytelling free us from those limitations to imagine a world anew, to see what we can't yet see, and to embrace the transformational.

Reports and interviews also made clear that we are seeing some variations in the types of approaches to changing narratives. We synthesize these into four approaches:

- **NARRATIVE LIFTING OR EXPANSION**, which helps a positive, existing alternative narrative become mainstream. (Example: Love is love.)
- **NARRATIVE DESTABILIZING**, which diminishes a narrative that does harm to part or all of our society. (Example: Men are caregivers, too.)
- **NARRATIVE SEEDING**, which develops a whole new narrative (or new to certain audiences) with the hope of becoming mainstream. (Example: Reparations are needed to heal our nation.)
- **NARRATIVE DEFENSE**, which holds the line on a positive narrative that we have "won" and need to defend. (Example: Tobacco use is harmful — whether in cigarettes or now in vape pens.)

For all of these, we heard agreement that we must expand our focus beyond elite influencers and our own communities and talk instead to the public at large. Too often, our movements craft stories that make us feel good or that we incorrectly believe will have broad appeal. In the CHALLENGES section, we detail how new audience research is helping to correct for this and help some storytellers reach beyond the choir — which at times can feel uncomfortable. But many we spoke with agree that we need to push ourselves outside of our comfort zones to realize the change we envision and deserve.

POINTS OF DIVERGENCE

Where we found divergence is in the details: different practitioners and organizations have varying theories of change. They take different routes and employ different reasoning to achieve

common goals and use and define highly related terms somewhat differently. We can speculate that these differences are informed by the many different "back stories" people bring when entering the narrative and cultural strategies ecosystem. Movement organizers, playwrights, social scientists, strategic communications staff, political campaigners, market researchers, public policy advocates, and comedians — to name just a few of the many different kinds of players in this shared arena — will, naturally, have very different theories about what works and why, and they'll use different words to describe their work. Here are some of the differences we observed:

- Different people and groups call their field of practice different things. Among the common variations are: narrative change, culture change, narrative strategy, cultural strategy, narrative organizing, and cultural organizing.
- Even when people use both "narrative" and "culture" to describe their work, they employ different hierarchies: some say narrative is nested within culture, others claim the inverse.
- While almost everyone works with both narratives and stories, some practitioners consider additional layers: frames, messages, deep narratives (sometimes meta narratives, core stories, or deep stories), narrative systems, and/or mindsets. Two recent publications define and explore some of these multiple layers and concepts: A Future For All of Us from the Butterfly Lab at Race Forward and Mindset Shifts: What Are They? Why Do They Matter? How Do They Happen? from FrameWorks Institute.
- With respect to core terminology, as Jeff Chang notes, there are lots of variations. In the TERMS AT-A-GLANCE box, we offer some definitions that we frequently encountered in interviews and reports.

In our opinion, none of these areas of divergence presents an ecosystem-level conflict that urgently needs to be "solved," and in many cases these points of difference are just varying approaches to very similar practices or different words for highly related concepts. In this report, we have tried to avoid getting entangled in small or highly technical points of difference. We have plenty of fundamentals in common and can continue to learn from the multiplicity of approaches that arise from the many disciplines that inform our ecosystem.

With so much emerging consensus, we are optimistic that we can turn our focus going forward to the *doing* of narrative and cultural strategies at scale.

TERMS AT-A-GLANCE

STORIES have a beginning, middle, and end. Stories recount a particular series of events that occur in a particular place and time and often contain structural archetypes such as a protagonist, a problem, a path, and a payoff. (Toward New Gravity)

NARRATIVES are patterns of stories that are held by individuals or groups and contain beliefs about the way the world works. They can be harmful, beneficial, or both. (Narrative Strategy: The Basics)

MESSAGES are hashtags, slogans, ideas, taglines that serve as reminders of what we think and how we might choose to act. They are most often used in the context of campaigns and strategic communications. The best of them become narratives. (A Future For All of Us)

NARRATIVE CHANGE is a change in the narratives that circulate within public discourse: either in the set of narratives in circulation (i.e., which narratives are used), or in their relative prevalence (i.e., which narratives are used more or less frequently), or both. (The Features of Narratives)

NARRATIVE STRATEGY is the practice of sharing connected stories to forge, spread, and reinforce beneficial narratives and counter harmful ones. These stories must be aligned to have a cumulative impact. And to be effective, they must take us on a journey from where we are today to a better future, revealing a new way the world can and should work. (Narrative Strategy: The Basics)

CULTURE is the prevailing beliefs, values, and customs of a group. Culture is also the set of practices (including storytelling and artmaking) that contain, transmit, or express ideas, values, habits, and behaviors between individuals and groups. (Making Waves: A Guide to Cultural Strategy)

CULTURAL STRATEGY, as defined by the Center for Cultural Power, is "a practice that leverages the catalytic and emotional power of culture and the arts to shift attitudes, behaviors, resources, narratives and power." (Cited in A Future For All of Us)

AUDIENCES are groups of people who share the same values and go to the same places to consume the same stories. (Audience @ Heart)

NARRATIVE CHANGE IN ACTION

That's a lot of theory and abstract concepts! Let's see how narrative change works in a few familiar, practical examples.

ISSUE	FROM	TO	RESULTS
SMOKING	Smoking is healthy, restorative, cool, and glamorous.	Smoking is gross and will kill you (and the people around you).	The campaign against smoking is arguably the greatest public health narrative victory in the last 50 years.
DEATH PENALTY	The death penalty is needed to punish those who commit murder or other serious offenses.	Application of the death penalty is flawed and deeply racist; the practice must be abolished.	National support for the death penalty has dropped, and more states have banned its use.
MARRIAGE EQUALITY	Marriage is between a man and a woman.	Love is Love	Marriage equality is the law of the land.
SEXUAL HARASSMENT	Boys will be boys.	#metoo	There is a growing culture of accountability for sexual harassment, with powerful men in politics, Hollywood, media, sports, and more losing their positions.
GUNS	"I'll give you my gun when you pry it from my cold, dead hands."	Gun violence is an epidemic, and we can prevent thousands of needless deaths each year if we take action.	The power of the NRA has been blunted by everyday moms speaking out about the importance of keeping their children safe.

This chart is just a quick snapshot to bring some of these basic ideas to life. But the reality is clear: our communities win when narratives that build collective power and a better world become so common sense that we no longer recognize them as something distinct from how society operates. (For detailed narrative change case studies, check out Shifting the Narrative: Six Case Studies from the Opportunity Agenda.)

"Overeducated liberal elites are a frustrating bunch in the sense that they have this notion that if you say the right facts and you say them very loudly … then certainly everyone will have to agree with you. Right? Narrative, in particular, doesn't work that way. In really doing narrative work, what we're aiming to do is to connect with other people around some shared humanity, giving them some perspective that we can have together, the storyteller and the audience, that will make us all feel good about some action that we can take. That's different work than talking *at* people about why you're right. And that's maybe something that isn't always said explicitly enough in what we're doing."

– Milan de Vries, independent researcher

A MAP OF THE ECOSYSTEM

In providing a map of this rapidly growing, dynamic, multidisciplinary ecosystem, our aim is to share a simple, intuitive option for looking at how the fields working on narrative and culture are currently structured. (We don't claim our map is the only way to illustrate these fields. An animated .gif of an ever-expanding plate of spaghetti, for example, might feel more accurate to some!)

Inspired by the Interaction Design Foundation, we chose a culture-friendly metaphor to illustrate the types of players who populate the ecosystem today: those On Stage (the Impact Storytellers), those Backstage (the Support Crew), and the Backers (the Funders). We describe each group's functions and their relationships with one another in order to help us better assess the ecosystem's current state: its strengths and the vulnerabilities and gaps that would benefit from improvements and further investment.

Please note that the people and communities who have historically experienced (and continue to experience) the greatest harms in our society must be fully embedded in all of the activities in the narrative and cultural strategies ecosystem. Without a real understanding of what affected people have to offer, what problems they are encountering, and what their goals are, impact storytelling can do more harm than good. The presence, experiences, insights, and voices of these groups must be fully interwoven in the efforts described below because, to paraphrase Anat Shenker-Osorio, the ultimate goal is to make people's lives better as fast as we can — and we can't do that without the collaboration of those most affected.

ON STAGE, WE HAVE THE IMPACT STORYTELLERS.

These are the people and organizations who tell stories with the explicit intent of bettering the world. These are the "doers" of narrative strategy who develop and execute programs to engage audiences with connected, intentional storytelling. They design and lead campaigns, and they write, produce, and distribute stories that advance beneficial narratives and counter harmful ones. The Impact Storytellers include those working in strategic communications, grassroots and field organizing, legal and public policy advocacy, and arts and cultural organizing. (Some examples include cultural strategists, narrative strategists, campaign strategists, impact producers, speechwriters, journalists, digital campaigners, deep canvassers, litigators, faith leaders, producers, screenwriters, and stand-up comics.)

BACKSTAGE, WE HAVE THE SUPPORT CREW.

These are the people and organizations who provide services and support to the Impact Storytellers. They help create, shore up, and expand the ideas, theories, research, measurement, skills, practices, interdisciplinary relationships, and other resources that build the narrative and cultural strategy fields. (Some examples include:

researchers, measurement experts, trainers, conveners, coaches, network weavers, and presenters.)

AND WE HAVE THE BACKERS, WHO PROVIDE FUNDING AND OTHER RESOURCES TO THOSE ON STAGE AND BACKSTAGE.

Providing financial and other resources to both the Impact Storytellers and the Support Crew are individual and institutional funders and financiers who act in support of all aspects of narrative and cultural strategy, helping to ensure that impact storytelling reaches the widest possible audience and achieves the greatest results. The Backers provide much-needed resources, strategic advice, insight, and connective tissue for the ecosystem. And the occasional bouquet of flowers on opening night. (Some examples include: foundations, donors, collaborative funds, funder affinity groups, and venture funds.)

LET'S ZOOM IN!

Implicit in this approach to mapping the ecosystem is the idea that there needs to be some reorientation in our relationships with one another. We believe that some of us should start thinking of ourselves as *in service* to others. This approach to mapping the ecosystem places the Impact Storytellers at center stage. Whether they are having deep canvassing conversations, sending digital communications, writing campaign speeches, engaging in courtroom advocacy, or writing Hollywood screenplays, the Impact Storytellers are the ones on the front lines doing the hard work of engaging audiences and shifting narratives. We see the various roles of the Support Crew (the researchers, trainers, and so on) as literally *in support of* the Impact Storytellers. And the Backers are, in turn, in support of the entire show, both those On Stage and Backstage.

While intuitive to some, this is not how many relationships in these fields are currently structured; this would, in some instances, greatly upend current power dynamics. We support challenging those dynamics, especially as we consider how to live our values in creating systems with equal and decentralized power. While Allen Kwabena Frimpong generally has reservations about the very existence of private foundations, given how many of them accumulated their wealth, he posits that there is a productive role for them to play in this space while also working *in service* of others: **"Foundations have always been an academic bedrock for learning and innovation. And so I do think foundations can be the beacons of narrative culture strategy and change and can support local entities and communities and uplift those stories."**

Let's zoom in a bit further and look at subtypes within each group.

→ Please note: In each grouping, we have provided just a handful of examples that might help give a more textured view than just the categories alone. There are more examples in Appendix 2, though even that longer list should not be considered comprehensive or exhaustive.

ON STAGE, THE IMPACT STORYTELLERS are the ones who engage audiences directly by designing, leading, and executing strategic, intentional programs that tell and spread stories that advance beneficial narratives and counter harmful ones. We think of this work as impact storytelling. It's not random storytelling or art for art's sake; it's storytelling with a designed, intentional purpose. There are four types of Impact Storytellers:

1. **STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS** encompasses developing strategic communications plans and executing them via traditional media activities like earned media and press outreach; public relations; engagement on shared, owned, and social media channels; and digital marketing and paid advertising.

2. **GRASSROOTS & FIELD ORGANIZING:** This bucket includes many of the activities associated with traditional organizing efforts, such as campaign development, deep canvassing, get-out-the-vote (GOTV) efforts, phone and text banks, direct-action demonstrations, and other live events.

3. **LEGAL & PUBLIC POLICY ADVOCACY:** Organizations produce policy papers, craft new legislation, lobby for change, and use the courts to bring about policy change. (Gifted courtroom litigators can be among our most compelling storytellers working to advance justice.)

4. **ARTISTS & CULTURAL ORGANIZERS:** The last of the four buckets focuses on artists and cultural organizing: engaging artists and athletes, leveraging creative activism, working with Hollywood to craft positive storylines, and harnessing the power of faith communities and fandoms. The way that Harness describes its work is typical of these kinds of efforts: **"We use the power of storytelling to imagine and create a more equitable world."**

ON STAGE: THE IMPACT STORYTELLERS

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS	GRASSROOTS & FIELD ORGANIZING	LEGAL & PUBLIC POLICY ADVOCACY	ARTISTS & CULTURAL ORGANIZERS
Strat Comms Plans Digital Content Paid Advertising Earned Media (press) Shared/Social Media Owned (newsletters) Rapid Response	Campaign Design Deep Canvassing GOTV Phone & Text Banks Direct Action Live Events	Advocacy Strategy Policy Papers Legislation Lobbying Impact Litigation Amicus Briefs	Cultural Strategy Artists & Athletes Creative Activism Hollywood Storylines Faith Communities Fandoms
Some Examples: A/B Partners Ad Council Color of Change The League Solutions Journalism	*Some Examples:* Community Change People's Action Sunrise Movement We Make the Future We the People–MI	*Some Examples:* DEMOS Nat'l Women's Law Ctr NDWA Race Forward	*Some Examples:* Ctr for Cultural Power Ctr for Media & Social Impact Define American Harness IllumiNative Moore + Assoc.

BACKSTAGE, THE SUPPORT CREW, as the name suggests, are less focused on the direct *doing* of narrative and more on providing strategy and support to the On-Stage Impact Storytellers via field and knowledge building, including work to deepen understanding of theory and practice, strengthen relationships, and allocate resources and provide creative and strategy services to campaigns, causes, and organizations. There are four types of Support Crew:

1. **RESEARCH, EVALUATION, AND LEARNING:** Organizations in this space provide critical research, evaluation, and learning support to others in the ecosystem, helping them better understand existing harmful narratives, the beneficial narratives they should amplify, the audiences they're trying to reach and where they can be found, and how to measure the work in the short and long term.
2. **TRAININGS & COHORTS:** Focused on training the next generation of narrative and cultural change talent, these organizations develop and provide formal training and fellowship programs, deep cohort coaching and development, and ongoing leadership development.
3. **CONVENERS & NETWORK WEAVERS** act as connective tissue for and help to nurture the field, creating space for collaboration and shared thinking and bringing organizations together to create community and promote best practices.

BACKSTAGE: THE SUPPORT CREW

RESEARCH, EVALUATION & LEARNING	TRAININGS & COHORTS	CONVENERS & NETWORK WEAVERS
Research Evaluation Measurement Content Testing	Training Coaching Cohorts Fellowships Leadership Development	Convenings Tables & Hubs Google Groups Newsletters
Some Examples: FrameWorks Institute Harmony Labs Norman Lear Center ORS Impact	*Some Examples:* Butterfly Lab Center for Story-based Strategy Liberation Ventures Muslim Narrative Change Cohort Opportunity Agenda ReFrame Re:Power	*Some Examples:* Constellations Creative Change Doc Society/Good Pitch frank Narrative Initiative RadComms

THE BACKERS provide much-needed financial and other resources, strategic advice, insight, and some connective tissue for the ecosystem. There are three types of Backers:

1. **FOUNDATIONS:** There are several traditional foundations — large, institutional ones and smaller, family foundations — that have been increasing their investments in cultural and narrative strategies.

2. **FUNDER GROUPS & REGRANTORS:** Funders are increasingly coming together in learning communities, either specializing in narrative, media, or culture, or adding narrative to their issue affinity group learning agendas. Regranting entities that have deep narrative, culture, or media expertise have also become more common and are an especially effective way of moving money to organizations and efforts quickly, particularly to artists and other changemakers.

3. **VENTURE FUNDS:** Since some of this work is so clearly adjacent to commercial media, entertainment, and technology industries, we are seeing an emergence of venture- and profit-oriented groups interested in media for social impact.

THE BACKERS

FOUNDATIONS	FUNDER GROUPS & REGRANTORS	VENTURE & INVESTMENT FUNDS
Some Examples: Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Ford Foundation Open Society Foundations Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Unbound Philanthropy	*Some Examples:* Color Congress Convergence Partnership Culture Change Fund Media Impact Funders Pop Culture Collaborative	*Some Examples:* Impact Partners New Media Ventures Starfish Accelerator

➔ Please note: **THE EXAMPLES LISTED ABOVE ARE FOR ILLUSTRATIVE PURPOSES ONLY.** We list them simply to give a more textured look at *some* of the actors Onstage, Backstage, and providing financial backing to many of our productions. Note that many organizations fit in several categories, in which case we have put them where, in our opinions and based on our research, they shine the most. In some cases, this is difficult to do, since many people and organizations wear multiple hats. Impact storytellers, for example, often do coaching and training, and the line between strategic communications and cultural organizing can be blurred depending on the campaign's focus and outreach. This is an important nuance to remember as we all try to build a balanced, robust ecosystem with all the requisite parts — namely, that the people and organizations within this space wear many hats and may require various types of resourcing.

➔ **THE NAMES OF THESE GROUPS ARE BY NO MEANS EXHAUSTIVE OR EXCLUSIVE.** Information and links to these organizations, along with a number of additional examples, can be found in Appendix 2. We fully acknowledge that there are more groups in our ecosystem now and that many will continue to join the fold. These are rapidly growing fields, and there are many organizations and individuals not named. Like the continuous painting of the Golden Gate Bridge, mapping this ecosystem is, we predict, a never-ending endeavor.

OBSERVATIONS & ASSESSMENT

This chapter includes a brief overview of the strengths and challenges of the narrative and cultural strategies ecosystem.

STRENGTHS

In surveying the ecosystem, we found several areas of strength and high performance. We call these out below to celebrate all that we have collectively built and where we are doing well as we consider what the future of the ecosystem should be.

WE HAVE ACHIEVED BROAD ALIGNMENT ON GOALS, VALUES, AND PRINCIPLES.

There are shared values and a shared vision and goal of centering those most impacted (which is united around a vision for an abundant, liberatory future). This must be held onto going forward, even as we reach new audiences and add more empirical rigor and continual improvement to our practices. There is also broad agreement that equity and anti-racist values and goals are important to our work, but we explore below how living up to these values remains a challenge and something to collectively work to improve.

WE HAVE MORE AGREEMENT ON DEFINITIONS, THEORY, AND CONCEPTS THAN PREVIOUSLY THOUGHT AND MANY NEW COMPLEMENTARY METHODOLOGIES AND FRAMEWORKS.

In our discussions with interviewees, we found broad agreement on what narrative work is but different frameworks for how to execute it. Current and past narrative strategies efforts have utilized several methodologies and frameworks from Story Platforms to ReFrame's VISION framework to Narrative Initiative's Four Baskets Field Guide to the Butterfly Lab's Toolkit to our own Narrative Strategy: The Basics. In addition, several new guides are coming out of the Center for Cultural Power, GalvanizeUSA, and others in 2022. As pointed out in a previous analysis of diverse narrative projects in California, the difference in approaches revolve around details in their theories of change — for example, which voices are centered, the tools and tactics employed, the scope of reach and impact, and which capacities are prioritized. But these should be seen as complementary rather than competitive approaches.

Each of these narrative design processes follows a similar path to produce hundreds or even thousands of stories connected to that narrative (often using creative briefs and other mechanisms). There are many different types of stories that can be told, but collective learning has created a clearer picture of the types of stories that work to best engage and persuade new audiences. What we heard in interviews and the literature is that our best stories will connect to a central narrative and be:

- Aspirational and about the future;
- Able to move audiences towards joy and abundance and away from fear and anger;
- Told in a diversity of voices;

- Created for a particular audience; and
- Often told from a first-person perspective.

"Stories operate on the level at which individuals move, while narrative is the level at which societies move"

– Jeff Chang, Writer & Senior Advisor, Race Forward

SOME RESOURCES FOR PRACTITIONERS: TOOLKITS, GUIDES & CREATIVE BRIEFS

A Future for All of Us: A Report on Phase 1 of The Butterfly Lab for Immigrant Narrative Strategy + a Narrative Design Toolkit (Butterfly Lab)
Community Accountability in Research, Policy & Practice: Ways to improve the use of evidence to promote equity
Cultural Strategy: An Introduction & Primer (Power California)
DIY Creative Brief (Story at Scale)
His Story: Shifting Narratives for Boys and Men of Color (Perception Institute and the Executives' Alliance for Boys and Men of Color)
Making Waves: A Guide to Cultural Strategy (The Culture Group)
No Going Back: A COVID-19 Cultural Strategy Activation Guide for Artists and Activists (Center for Cultural Power)
Oakland Futures Creative Brief (Center for Cultural Power)
The Storytellers' Guide to Changing the World (Culture Surge)
Vision, Values, and Voice: A Communications Toolkit (Opportunity Agenda)

THE CULTURAL STRATEGY FIELD HAS LOTS OF DYNAMIC ENERGY AND POWERFUL LEADERS WHO ARE LARGELY BIPOC, WOMEN, AND LGBTQ+ PEOPLE.
In cultural organizing, interviewees repeatedly described the space as largely being led by women of color, with strong BIPOC and LGBTQ+ representation among staff and leadership. This is certainly positive and reflects the diversity of the social justice space. But one thing to be mindful of in the context of funding is a point Cristina Uribe raised: **"It's not unlike teaching and nursing … fields that are dominated by women don't always get the same kind of funding as fields that are dominated by men."** In Transforming Narrative Waters: Growing the Practice of Deep Narrative Change in the UK, Ruth Taylor found it inspiring that parts of the US ecosystem were largely led by BIPOC leaders. She described the work as being **"truly embedded in movements for liberation."** Importantly, this is not the case with narrative strategy broadly. Erica Williams Simon offered a sobering anecdote: **"It is still pretty common for me to be on a call that is about narrative strategy and be one of maybe three people of color on it. Cultural strategy,**

that's never the case, right? And largely because I think that narrative work is so steeped in research — and research organizations, as you know, are predominantly white."

THE ECOSYSTEM IS GROWING.

In the last five years, we've seen more funders enter the space. Alvin Starks echoed this with his own reflections on his foundation leaning in more in 2017: **"We elevated our work on narrative change largely, I think like many advocates and funders, from our understanding of the 2016 election and its influence in shaping democracy. And really understand how narratives drove public will, consciousness, understanding, whether good or bad... So the foundation began to explore narratives of race and class, and more deeply what are the toxic narratives that have to be upended in order to advance social justice or shape broader understanding of complex human rights issues?"** Alongside the growing interest from funders, we've also seen growth in existing organizations (e.g., NDWA, Color of Change, and ReFrame), as well as the establishment of new organizations in the last five to seven years (e.g., Narrative Initiative, Harness, The League, Center for Cultural Power, and IllumiNative). The ecosystem is undoubtedly growing — and that's a great thing!

INNOVATIONS IN AUDIENCE RESEARCH HAVE ELEVATED OUR ABILITY TO HAVE MORE IMPACT.

As an ecosystem, we have all gotten better at considering audiences as we craft our work. That's partially thanks to the attempts in both the political and social justice realms to better define audiences and understand political trends — particularly the work of Harmony Labs and their Narrative Observatory, which allows organizations to see how different values-based audiences consume media, where they spend their time online, what they watch, and how we can best meet them where they are. There have also been innovations in impact assessment and technical knowledge about narratives (see, in particular, Measuring Narrative Change from ORS Impact, Measuring the Impacts of Poverty Narrative Change from Jennifer Green and Milan de Vries, and The Features of Narratives from FrameWorks Institute). There's still more work to do as we sharpen our approach to audiences, storytelling, and research — as you can see in the CHALLENGES section — but overall, progress in narrative research has been significant.

CHALLENGES

Alongside the alignment and areas of success highlighted in the STRENGTHS section, there are clear areas where we have challenges, gaps, and opportunities — where we can improve how things operate for those On Stage and Backstage and for the Backers providing investment support. While we saw a lot of alignment in foundational language and theory, we found less immediate alignment in standards of training and employment of best practices. This was reiterated in many interviews, including when Nat Kendall-Taylor cautioned, **"I think there's a lot of slippage between narrative in theory and understanding ... and how we do it in practice."**

WE DON'T ALWAYS LEAD WITH A DISTRIBUTION AND IMPACT STORYTELLING MINDSET.
One critique we heard frequently is that we sometimes fall into the trap of "storytelling for storytelling's sake." We assume that a good story will find its way into the world and create the change we want — without thinking first about how to tailor it to a specific audience and distribute it strategically so it's seen by the right people and reaches the necessary scale. But as this ecosystem matures and as we think about how to build on our successes, we must grapple with how to factor audience and distribution into our thinking and planning on the front end.

REPORTS: TOO MANY, TOO ACADEMIC, AND TOO FOCUSED ON THEORY AND NOT ON MEASUREMENT.
To date, we've invested a lot in narrative theory and research, but not nearly enough on coordinating, developing, testing, and optimizing storytelling for impact. That means we're over-indexing on theoretical models and approaches and not getting to enough of the *doing* of narrative (which we'll go into in more detail below). Even when the research and/or reports are fruitful, though, practitioners lamented that much of the research was too academic and too inaccessible[1] to incorporate into their work. Rinku Sen said she simply can't keep up with what's being produced, indicating some research isn't being absorbed and applied: **"There are a lot of tools and studies, and reports. It's hard to keep up with them all. Every week I find new things that I'd never heard of before that are absolutely essential to my work."**

THERE IS A LOOMING LEADERSHIP AND STAFF PIPELINE CRISIS.
We heard two distinct but related challenges related to hiring. First, questions about who will be the next generation of leaders — the future Ai-jen Poo, Rashad Robinson, and Favianna Rodriguez — frequently surfaced in reports and interviews. Second, while there has been an explosion of hiring, there is not a large enough pool of job-ready candidates and there is a lack of training to develop the next generation of leaders. (And clearly a variety of trainings need to be designed to support the variety of functions needed in this ecosystem.) On the first point, Bridgit Evans told us, **"There's really no professional development pipeline for leadership in this space, and we need to fix that. There aren't field-specific fellowships. There aren't even executive coaches who are really well-versed in this kind of strange hybrid environment that we're all working in. And so what we are arriving at is a breaking point where some leaders who have been in the space for a very long time are evolving their leadership ... and there isn't necessarily a next gen of that."** Caty Borum Chattoo, a professor and a practitioner, lamented about the lack of a pipeline to get younger staff into this ecosystem: **"There's no career path ... we're not training people even at the college level to do this work."** Trevor Smith also lifted up the need for coaching and training specifically for Black men: **"We need a pipeline for Black, male narrative and culture change strategists ... so often the deaths that spark these large scale protests — from Trayvon Martin to Eric Garner to George Floyd — are Black men. We need more space to tell our stories and the ways in which we are perceived and stereotyped in society."**

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[1] The idea of "accessibility" is in all senses of the term. Research is often too technical, not readable by folks with certain disabilities, too expensive (e.g., behind a paywall or a pricey textbook), or literally unpublished because it was a private, commissioned report.

WE HAVEN'T NAILED MEASUREMENT YET.

Many agreed that measurement is a useful tool to organizations as they craft their programs but also argued that we cannot treat measurement as the end-all and be-all of our work. To these interviewees, our adherence to measurement (often at the request of funders) inhibits organizations' ability to experiment. Furthermore, measurement tools remain insufficient for what we want to measure and inaccessible even when they are applicable. (And that's holding us back.) In searching for alignment around what we *should* be measuring, everyone – practitioners, researchers, and funders alike – agreed that we have to lengthen our measurement process to match the decade it may take to achieve measurable narrative and cultural change. Several interviewees also mentioned the need to democratize what measurement metrics look like. Essentially, they argue that we don't yet have the right metrics for our work — that "vanity metrics" such as page views, clicks, or an increase in followers, are insufficient — and that practitioners need to reimagine what measurement within the narrative and culture change ecosystem should look like. As part of that work, we may need to build a practice of experimentation and find ways to understand and assess the parts of this work that aren't readily measurable.

Another complaint we have heard frequently from the field is about the cost of measurement. We know that certain tools or methodologies are out of reach for many budget-constrained organizations, and we need to figure out cheaper, faster ways to measure progress, building on some of the lighter lift options currently available. Riki Conrey notes that one way to solve this is to use **"measurement as a gating process. Use the simplest, cheapest thing that you have to determine which of all the options can work, and if you don't have any that work, go back to the drawing board. Only if you have a set of things that passes the cheap test should you be considering the expensive tests."** Examples of inexpensive measurement options include Grow Progress for Persuasion or Facebook testing for engagement.

And knowing that we do not always have the luxury of measuring our work over the long term, Nikki Kalra posits that there are ways to measure progress on a shorter horizon: **"You're probably not going to see results of your narrative change strategy in the two-year period that you're funding for. So we've been trying to think about, okay, what might you see that signals that you're on the way to broader shifts? … We can at least see where progress is being made."** Bridgit Evans offers another practical approach: **"As my colleague Tracy Van Slyke has found, we can evaluate our progress in two years around the narrative infrastructure needed to achieve culture change at scale … And we can evaluate at seven years if and how infrastructure plus strategy have actually moved us considerably to a new cultural condition."**

COMMUNICATION AND KNOWLEDGE-SHARING IS INCONSISTENT AND SPOTTY.

Interviewees reported a need to formalize communications across the ecosystem. Informal relationships or project-based ones dominate, which means structure and consistency around these relations are not long lasting and reinforce inequalities within the ecosystem. Often communication and information sharing happens between people who are already connected

with one another in informal spaces like Google groups, Slack channels, personal conversations, or via consultants or funders who partner with multiple organizations. Everyone we spoke with – and we really mean everyone – was actively searching for more formal collective and learning spaces. Milan de Vries quipped, **"There are conferences for political scientists. There are conferences for model train builders. I'm not sure that there are places where narrative strategists congregate."**

THERE ARE CLEAR HURDLES TO GREATER COLLABORATION.
Many interviewees commented on how the ecosystem is often inclined to collaborate — with some suggesting that may be in part because of the many women in positions of leadership who make doing so a priority. There was a sense that with greater support from funders, more could be done to mitigate any real or perceived competition. Joseph Phelan made a point about how funds aren't made available for organizations to collaborate: **"There's an assumption [in philanthropy] that organizations should just be collaborating because they have aligned values, they know each other, etc. And at the same time many organizations see the strength in collaboration and understand the importance of the relationship and trust building so that organizations and people can then align strategy. But because of the assumptions held by philanthropy and the short-term and program/project-based approach to funding, many organizations are begging and borrowing against their own time, expertise, and budget to collaborate. If collaboration is a critical piece of narrative infrastructure/ecosystem then it should be resourced as such."**

WE NEED TO ADJUST OUR TIMELINES — IN BOTH DIRECTIONS.
We heard from nearly everyone — and have referenced in a few places in these pages — that we need to broaden the time horizon we consider for this work. We're currently stuck in one-to-three year cycles when the full evolution of our work might actually require seven-to-ten years, possibly more. As Jeff Niederdeppe details with an example about the public health battle over tobacco and smoking: **"If we were to evaluate the success of the tobacco control movement in this country in three-year windows, you'd see maybe a percentage point change, and you'd say, 'Oh, not good enough, not fast enough!' If you look at the change from 1950 to 2022 you would say 'It's one of the biggest public health successes in history!' But you don't see that in a three-year window. You see that in the long view."**

As we consider how to collectively make that adjustment, we also offer up another challenge we see on the horizon — not one that was offered by our interviewees but something we believe is important to call out. As a movement, we are sometimes missing the moment. As Thomas Coomes says in his recent article, moments are more relevant and more a part of people's lives than the campaigns we create. We have the opportunity to permanently shift narratives in big moments — many of which we can never plan for or anticipate. How can we better prepare for those? How can we collectively adjust to doing this work on a longer time horizon while also prioritizing rapid-response moments with the right calls to action — moments like the devastating murder of George Floyd.

Elaborating on that example, activists have been working for years to expand racial justice narratives with protests, direct action, and buycotts — and ultimately were successful at putting #BlackLivesMatter at the center of the national conversation. With the massive uprisings that followed the release of Darnella Frazier's harrowing video footage, we had an opportunity to leverage that long-standing activism and rapidly shift narratives in a moment of national openness and conversation. On a different issue, Simone Biles created space at the Summer Olympics for us to discuss mental health — which came on the heels of a growing understanding and conversation about its importance. In the current moment, the somber context of the invasion of Ukraine offers us the opportunity to expand narratives around what a humanity-first foreign policy might look like and how we might combat the racism in the current coverage and treatment of refugees. In all of these cases, while there may have been some scenario planning, we couldn't have predicted ahead of time precisely what event might unfold and when; together, we need to be better about anticipating possible events, developing game plans, and ensuring that we are equipped to meet the moment when it comes.

"The number of missed opportunities in the last year is staggering … In a time when COVID has changed everything and George Floyd's murder … the number of opportunities to shift narrative that just didn't happen because there was nobody there creating content and testing content rapidly or trying to apply narrative to what was going on is stunning. There is nobody with the resources or the task to do this right now."

– Milan de Vries, independent researcher

WE ARE NOT LIVING UP TO ALL OF OUR SHARED VALUES.
As mentioned above, we heard (and know!) that our fields believe equity and anti-racism are central to our work. That said, we don't always live up to these ideals in everyday practice. Rinku Sen referenced a dynamic where strategy and messaging are sometimes driven by funders and a combination of researchers and strategists. In those instances, the Backstage Support Crew receive support from the Backers to craft or apply a novel theory, model, or messages and then need groups in the ecosystem to test it out on the doors or in person — often without their consultation or buy-in. This means that grassroots organizations, which are often led by and/or serve people of color, are cut out of funding, strategy, and decision making conversations and don't have the same kind of power or influence with certain funders that some of those Backstage enjoy.

> "In communications-related research, there is inequity that needs to be addressed. Communications strategists who will never have to knock on a door hold enormous power over the words that people should say when they're at the door ... Part of what happens is funders support a message-testing process that the messages come out of, and then the funders say, 'Everybody we fund needs to follow this.' So, that ends up cutting out groups who don't agree with the narrative direction ... it ends up diminishing their power in their political system, in that ecosystem, and sometimes they're right, and the researchers were wrong."
>
> – Rinku Sen, Executive Director, Narrative Initiative

CURRENT FUNDING DOESN'T ENABLE THE BEST WORK TO GET DONE.

Everyone interviewed, especially the funders, commented that it was clear that the current level and type of financial support isn't adequate and may actually hamper the ecosystem's abilities. Some of the funding challenges aren't specific to investments in narrative or culture, and live in philanthropy at large.[2] Alvin Starks noted that **"Foundations award grants, and by the notion of awards, we are creating winners and losers. People don't apply for shared grants; they apply for exclusive grants. So by de facto of the context that we're working in, we don't see enough coordination."** Additionally, in narrative and culture, reporting requirements can be too stringent, the standard metrics not customized to the needs of cultural and narrative strategies, the time horizon too short, or the grant sizes too small to be effective.

> "With short-term funding and reporting requirements ... oftentimes, the idea is, well, I'm going to give you $50,000 and you're going to do X, Y, and Z, and the outcome will be you have changed the world. But the thing is we're not building cabinets or houses ... We are building power — power expressed through collective action of people. We are doing this work in a completely unpredictable world ... We should be held accountable for the things that we think we're going to do, and we need to create flexibility in order to run at opportunities as they arrive based on the resources and skill sets that we have."
>
> – Joseph Phelan, Executive Director, ReFrame

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[2] For more on this, Just Giving: Why Philanthropy is Failing Democracy and How it Can Do Better and The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex are good entry points.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear from interviews and reports that the ecosystem has a common foundational understanding of narrative and culture strategies, but the next phase needs to focus on doing the work at a larger scale and make greater progress toward our collective goals. This assessment, synthesized from all we heard and read, points to some important opportunities for improvement detailed in five key recommendations.

1. MORE COORDINATION, PRODUCTION, AND DISTRIBUTION OF IMPACT STORYTELLING!

We've invested a lot in theory and research but not nearly enough in coordinating, developing, testing, and optimizing storytelling for impact. And then, it is crucial that we produce and distribute these stories at scale, which means thousands and thousands (maybe millions) of connected stories. This includes better leveraging of what is created by the media and entertainment industries, so it's about both what we produce and how (and what) we influence commercial entities to produce.

Milan de Vries told us, **"This is not, make one video that takes a month to make or write one** *Medium* **article that you publish three weeks after it's too late … [We need] 100 things that are ready the day after tomorrow … A couple of orders of magnitude more than what people think now."** But again, we need *connected* stories. As Nat Kendall-Taylor said and others echoed, **"If you have a million uncoordinated, awesome stories, it doesn't add up to 500,000 stories that carry and advance a common narrative."** The creation of content shops that churn out content may help us achieve this volume of stories. Into Action is a great example of this kind of effort to produce and distribute hundreds of pieces of content every week.

> "There needs to be more investment in stories and experimentation around stories and audience."
>
> — Cristina Uribe, Chief Campaigns Officer, Center for Cultural Power

We also need **more impact stories in more places**. There is no such thing as a place in society where storytelling doesn't happen. But there are some spaces – like fiction, music, comedy, religion, advertising, pornography (see the point below about being uncomfortable), and others – that are highly effective for spreading stories to new audiences and constitute significant opportunities for social justice and progressive movements. And, it's not just the stories that we produce but also what we influence others, like the entertainment industry, to produce and how we amplify and organize around those stories. In thinking through where to invest, Kristina Mevs-Apgar remarked that we don't always have to dream up new things but can sometimes take advantage of the path that others in the private industry are already paving: **"I'm a big fan of**

coattails, and I think more people should ride on others' coattails. My dream is that the movement doesn't always invent the thing; they hop on someone else's thing."

Finally, we need stories from **more storytellers for more audiences**, and that might make us uncomfortable. While we in the social justice movement are getting better at expressing ourselves, ensuring platforms for our communities' voices, and telling stories to our base, that doesn't help us engage persuadable audiences. Connecting with them may take a different type of story or a different storyteller whose views overlap on one narrative but perhaps not all. But that is OK. As Rinku Sen reminded us, **"People who do this work have to believe that people can change. They can become active where they were inactive. They can become not racist where they were racist. They can leave patriarchy behind. They can develop respect for their coworkers. Every socially beneficial thing we want people to do requires some change."** Kristina Mevs-Apgar pointed out, **"We sometimes are held back by our ethics, and a battle between integrity and winning, and tailoring messages to an audience that might be persuadable or not on our side … We don't want to change the way we think about something to tailor it to how that audience would … best consume it. We have a hard time meeting people where they are, so we leave the middle uncontested."** Anat Shenker-Osorio reinforced this when she told us that organizations that are really good at narrative are **"ruthlessly strategic"** and **"willing to change their own assumptions."**

2. MORE TRAINING, MORE TALENT!

To help solve both the coming leadership and current pipeline challenges, we need to create more robust training that creates standards in curricula and uplifts best practices — and maybe even start a certificate program or fellows programs, like CORO, that place new people in organizations for training. (Recent examples of certificate programs are the Content Marketing Institute and the social impact certificates that are now offered at many universities.) Taking this point further, Rinku Sen commented, **"There are intermediaries that do training … but there is a greater demand for help on actually trying things out in a community context than the current set of intermediaries has been able to handle."** This will also serve to democratize the work – another call that was repeatedly brought up in interviews and reports. As Milan de Vries pointed out, **"I think part of the democratization is also just bringing some structure or … building the space in which people can even be in the conversations about how this work is done."** Furthermore, as Caty Borum Chattoo noted, establishing a formal program or certificate will both help with training needs and lend even more legitimacy to the work.

3. MORE PRACTICAL, USEFUL, AND AFFORDABLE RESEARCH AND MEASUREMENT!

Collectively, we support and conduct a lot of general research work about "what works" on a theoretical level. But these reports are often highly academic and technical, making them hard for many to access. Instead, any research that is published should be practical, accessible, and follow equitable research practices that are accountable to affected communities. Many interviewees mentioned a desire for more accessibility — certainly for anyone with a disability but

also through the use of free, plain, succinct language comprehendible by non-academics and busy people! All of this will contribute to democratizing the work.

In addition to how we communicate, we should re-prioritize what we research to focus more on actual measurement. More reporting on measurement of a specific program, content type, message tone, audience, etc., would help us sharpen our approaches and efforts and move our work forward. We — researchers and non-researchers alike — need a space in which to convene and commit to creating these tools, methods, and approaches so that we can iterate and improve.

Even as we sharpen our approach to measurement, though, we should continue to do things that can't be measured. Milan de Vries has a provocative take, arguing that an insistence on measurement in all cases is hampering us: **"I will say this unequivocally, we should absolutely be doing work that can't be measured. 100%. If you don't have data about the impact of individual community organizing events in Georgia, you can still understand the narrative of Stacey Abrams deciding to invest in Georgia over the course of a number of years and organizers getting together for a number of years. And so perhaps the answer for funders is in part instead of looking at every data point, let's look at the narratives that emerge from the patterns of work that we're doing and say there is data, or at least understanding, in that as well."** As mentioned in the WE HAVEN'T NAILED MEASUREMENT YET part of the CHALLENGES section, solving for this may require that the field find new ways to understand and assess the parts of our work that aren't readily measurable.

> "We need to be able to look at time scales that are five, seven, ten years long. I think that three-year evaluations are unfortunate because that's usually the longest time frame that a grant will enable … That's one of the things that we kind of have to do away with. It may take seven years to sustainably and foundationally change culture … And we have to actually let go of the idea that evaluating individual people, individual projects, individual campaigns, is a valid way to gauge cultural impact at scale."
>
> – Bridgit Antoinette Evans, Chief Executive Officer, Pop Culture Collaborative

4. MORE SPACES FOR COORDINATION AND COLLECTIVE LEARNING!

There is a constant and clear call from all parts of the ecosystem that we need more coordination to help build relationships and trust; to co-create shared strategy, standards, and practices; to build better coordination and collaborations; and to ensure that we aren't missing opportunities because the right people and organizations aren't appropriately resourced to do critical

components of the work. This requires more and better network weaving, convenings, cohorts, and collaborative learning spaces where communities of practice can come together to share knowledge and build infrastructure. This could mean creating more tables and hubs around which we can coordinate strategy on specific narratives and audiences, while being patient and kind to ourselves because this kind of coordination and relationship-building takes time to do well. Finally, in addition to regular meetings to share updates and learning, we need an annual conference … or two. Several other fields could serve as examples for this work, such as social impact and content marketing.

5. MORE ABUNDANT, MORE EFFICIENT, MORE STRATEGIC FUNDING!

More strategic funding of narrative and culture, which includes longer timeframes and bigger grants that are focused on the goal (rather than the exact project roadmap), would encourage collaboration, learning, experimentation, and iteration. To do this, funders have to reorganize to prioritize narrative change. As Trevor Smith told us, **"I'd like to see philanthropy do more … have more narrative change departments and then fund those departments like they're program staff."** Ellen Friedman went so far as to say **"I suspect if some core organizations got multimillion dollar unrestricted grants for five to seven years, that would probably goose the field in a really substantial way. But … it has to be unrestricted."** Others thought that the application process needs to change. One suggestion was a "common app" (similar to what is used by over 900 college admissions offices) that also addressed the particular needs of the narrative and culture change fields, such as by encouraging collaborative efforts, supporting new and different players (especially the types identified in our mapping), instituting longer timelines, foregoing or imagining different deliverables, and moving funds at a faster rate, etc. Another recommendation was peer review of applications.

TOWARD THE FUTURE

If you've stayed with us this long, you must be a narrative super fan! For being in this fight with us and wanting to help strengthen our field in the years ahead, thank you.

We hope this report has provided a clear picture of the state of narrative and cultural strategies today. You can see how far practitioners have come; how this "strange, hybrid environment" (as Bridgit Evans put it) has built upon others' work and ideas in beautiful ways; and how as a community we have found ways to collaborate, coordinate, and align even without formal structures. This ecosystem is strong and diverse, and we have clearly operated beyond our means, achieving even more than we have been tasked or funded to do.

This extraordinary community of practitioners and investors — those On Stage, Backstage, and the Backers — are also clearly ready to go to the next level, with rigorous approaches and clear ideas of what we might do together. We are ready for deeper conversations around "the how": How might we generate more impact stories? How might we train more people and institutions to do this work? How can we make research and measurement more affordable, accessible and usable? How and where can we create more spaces for collective learning? How can we transform funding of this ecosystem?

> "Because of our mythologies, we want a magic bullet. We want to get there quick. We want to be experts without putting in the time to study and do. We want the workaround. The reality is narrative change and cultural change is a part of a larger strategy to re-shape society. We cannot be taken in by the promise of a magic bullet. Magic bullets don't exist. When we're thinking about developing narrative strategy, cultural strategy, the field, and infrastructure we cannot bet on magic bullets."
>
> – Joseph Phelan, Executive Director, ReFrame

There is always a fear that this moment of momentum and interest might not last. That funding will dry up. That we might not be able to rise to meet the challenges. But when we look out over the existing ecosystem, we see a community that is ready for the hard work that lies ahead. A community that knows that magic bullets don't exist. And a community that is ready to make sure that our collective work results in the levels of impact we know we need in order to achieve, as our friends at the Butterfly Lab say, a future for all of us.

APPENDIX 1: OUR METHODOLOGY

This ecosystem mapping report was produced by reviewing existing reports and applied research (see Consulted Materials list in Appendix 3) and conducting interviews with funders and narrative and culture change experts. We used these inputs to describe current field-level standards, practices, knowledge, and relevant reports and investments with respect to narrative change and culture change research and strategy in the nonprofit field in general.

Every project has its boundaries and limitations. Our focus was on those aspects of narrative and cultural strategy that nonprofit philanthropy can invest in within the US. With that scope in mind, please note that this report does not cover the following:

- The commercial entertainment, media, and technology industries (studios, streamers, tech platforms, labor guilds and unions);
- Academia (both academic research and film/storytelling/communications training programs, including film schools and MFA programs — other than relevant applied research centers associated with universities);
- Political campaigns (including media programs like Fellow Americans, The Hub, and ACRONYM), whether on the coordinated or independent side;
- Commercial journalism;
- Research vendors (Swayable, Grow Progress, YouGov) — outside of what interviewees offered in the course of conversation;
- Performing arts institutes and presenters (symphonies, operas, ballets, theaters, venues, and youth arts organizations);
- Visual art institutes (museums, galleries);
- Government agencies (federal, state, or local);
- Individual artists;
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion programs for developing and supporting individual artists; or
- International work.

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

As much as possible, we standardized the questions we asked the interviewees.

1. We are landscaping the field of what some people call narrative change strategy, some call cultural strategy. For the purposes of this conversation, without getting too bogged down, what do you call it and how do you define it?
   a. What strategy, activities, or approaches are you using for your narrative and cultural strategies?
   b. Who is the field? How unified does it feel to you? How collaborative does it feel?
2. How is the field's current approach to narrative change positive or strong? Where could it

be improved? *More specific prompts could include:*

    a. How does this relate to investment? Are we funding the right things at the right levels? Are some areas over-invested in or under-invested in?

    b. How connected or collaborative does the field feel? Where do you see narrative alignment? What are the best spaces for connection that you see? How can we increase trust and collaboration?

    c. How nimble and able to do rapid response does the field feel? What could increase this?

    d. How patient does the field feel? (Since some of this is long-term work.) What could increase this?

    e. What do you think could improve the field's practice around distribution?

3. How has the field changed in the last five years? *More specific prompts could include:*

    a. How has the practice changed, if at all?

    b. How has the theory changed, if at all?

    c. How has leadership of the field changed, if at all?

    d. How has funding changed, if at all?

    e. How has our approach to measurement changed, if at all?

4. What values define this field and its work?

    a. General follow up: How are we living up to the values you just named? How has that changed in the last five years?

    b. If one of our values is equity, are we living up to it? How does this compare to before June 2020?

5. In terms of equity, measured proof, and reaching scale, what are best practices that you see in the field? *More specific prompts could include:*

    a. What are practices we aren't but should be doing?

    b. What do you think should be a part of best practices around narrative design? Who should be involved in it?

    c. Again, in terms of equity, measured proof, and reaching scale, who is doing this work right? To what organizations/leaders should we be looking for strong examples of great work? What issue areas are seeing progress that we might emulate?

6. What do you think could improve the field's understanding of different audiences?

    a. Which audiences are we as a field focused too much on? Not enough on?

7. What would it take to get it to a place of high performance?

8. How are you currently thinking about understanding progress for narrative strategies, in terms of tracking or measuring change or evaluating programs?

    a. On what kind of timescale?

    b. What would be helpful to you or the teams you work with in supporting understanding progress and measuring narrative change?

9. What should the field look like in five years?

    a. How does the field need to grow in the next five years to achieve that?

    b. What do we need more of? (Less of?)

10. Is there anything else you'd like to mention that we haven't covered yet?

Specific questions that we added for practitioners:

- What do you think could improve the field's practice around distribution?
- What are some examples of shared resources or infrastructure that you rely on?
- Does it feel like the field has a sense of a shared purpose or goals?

APPENDIX 2: A MAP OF THE ECOSYSTEM (SOME EXAMPLES)

To bring some of the ideas described in this report to light, here are just some of the illustrative examples of institutions, categorized into the three groups discussed in A MAP OF THE ECOSYSTEM: the On Stage Impact Storytellers, the Backstage Support Crew, and the Backers.

➔ Reminder: This list is not intended to be an exhaustive or exclusive list but is intended to give a more textured look at *some* of the different types of players working On Stage, Backstage, and serving as financial Backers in our shared ecosystem.

ON STAGE: THE IMPACT STORYTELLERS

Here are examples of different types of Impact Storytellers: those working in strategic communications, grassroots and field organizing, legal and public policy advocacy, as well as artists and cultural organizers. All of these different types of Impact Storytellers are listed here together in alphabetical order.

1Hood Media builds liberated communities through art, education, and social justice.

A/B Partners builds brands, launches campaigns, designs events, and drives social content that shapes the conversation on labor, racial, and other social justice issues.

Accelerate Change is a nonprofit media lab dedicated to catalyzing new scalable and sustainable digital media models for citizen engagement with a focus on Black, Latinx, and immigrant communities, as well as parents. Platforms they have incubated include PushBlack, Pulso, and Parents Together.

Ad Council uses creative marketing to solve complex social issues. Notable campaigns include helping to spread awareness about polio in the 1950s, racial discrimination in the 1960s, and AIDS in the 1980s.

ART NOT WAR is a creative agency and cultural impact firm that makes high-impact media, leads cultural campaigns, and works with artists and activists to help craft and change policy.

The Big We is a collective of creative, hopeful risk-takers shaping culture through storytelling and strategy and boldly shaping narratives that transform generations.

Center for Cultural Power is a women of color and artist-led organization that inspires artists and culture makers to imagine a world where power is distributed equitably and where we live in harmony with nature.

Center for Media & Social Impact (American University) is a creative innovation lab and research center at American University that creates, studies, and showcases media for equity, social change, and social justice.

Cinereach develops creative media designed to champion an equitable culture.

Color of Change is the nation's largest online racial justice organization. With seven million members, they advocate for corporations and government to create a more human and less hostile world for Black people in America.

Community Change builds power for the people most marginalized by injustice — especially people of color, women, immigrants, and people struggling to make ends meet — and advocates for a society where all communities thrive.

Define American is a culture-change organization that uses the power of narrative to humanize conversations about immigrants.

Demos is a think tank that powers the movement for a just, inclusive, multiracial democracy.

Fenton Communications is a social change agency that works with nonprofits, foundations, advocates, and brands to champion important progressive issues.

Forward Together works to transform culture and policy, uniting communities to win rights, recognition and resources for all families and to dismantle the ways our society marginalizes us based on race, sexuality, and gender.

Galvanize USA is a nonpartisan organization that uses research, storytelling, and community building to support women in using their civic power to create an America that works for everyone.

Harness educates, inspires, and activates an interdependent community of cultural organizers to use the power of storytelling to imagine and create a more equitable world.

Hattaway Communications is a progressive communications firm.

HeadCount uses the power of music to register voters and promote participation in democracy.

IllumiNative increases the visibility of – and challenges the negative narrative about – Native Nations and peoples in American society.

Into Action is a movement of designers, illustrators, animators, and artists building cultural momentum around civic engagement and the issues affecting our country and world.

The League is a social impact collective that leverages the reach and visibility of pop culture to inspire civic engagement within the New American Majority, the diverse coalition that is leading America forward, both politically and culturally.

Moore + Associates is a boutique creative agency that believes cultural change is critical to political change and that humor is an effective way to shift culture.

National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) works to ensure respect, recognition, and rights for the nearly 2.5 million nannies, house cleaners, and home-care workers who do the essential work of caring for our loved ones and our homes.

National Women's Law Center fights for gender justice—in the courts, in public policy, and in our society—working across the issues that are central to the lives of women and girls.

Not An Alternative combines art, activism, and theory to affect popular understandings of events, symbols, institutions, and history.

Participant produces media with socially relevant themes. It is dedicated to creating entertainment that inspires audiences to engage in positive social change.

People's Action is a national network of state and local grassroots power-building organizations united in fighting for justice.

Propper Daley is a social impact agency specializing in designing and executing world-class impact programs and campaigns that create awareness, shift perceptions, and change outcomes on critical issues.

Race Forward brings systemic analysis and an innovative approach to complex race issues to help people take effective action toward racial equity.

Revolve Impact is a social action and creative agency that uses radical impagination, art, and culture to communicate ideas, connect brands with causes, and advance social change.

Roosevelt Institute focuses on corporate and public power, labor and wages, and the economics of race and gender inequality to make our economy and democracy work for the many, not the few.

Solutions Journalism is working to transform journalism so that all people have access to news that helps them envision and build a more equitable and sustainable world.

Soze is a creative agency that crafts campaigns, projects, and strategies for a variety of social justice, nonprofit, and corporate clients.

Spitfire Strategies is a strategic communications firm that partners with nonprofits and foundations working on various issues and issue campaigns.

Storyline Partners is a collective of culture-change strategists, issue-based organizations, and entertainment industry partners that supports inclusive, culturally resonant, authentic, and nuanced storytelling in popular culture.

Sunrise Movement is a youth movement to make climate change an urgent priority across America while also creating millions of good jobs.

Wake Up & Vote is a nonprofit storytelling studio that creates impactful and authentic digital stories promoting a positive vision of America's shared future.

We Make the Future serves as the new implementation home for the Race Class Narrative (RCN). It combines strategic communications and coalition building to develop a shared narrative that motivates the progressive base and persuades the middle.

We The People–Michigan is a state-based organization building long-term organizing infrastructure in Michigan.

Writ Large is a cultural strategy and social impact agency that helps leaders scale urgent causes through the power of culture and coalitions.
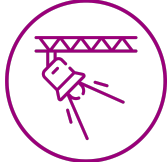
BACKSTAGE: THE SUPPORT CREW

Here are examples of different types of Support Crew members: those doing research, measurement, evaluation, and learning; trainers and cohort leaders; and conveners and other kinds of network weavers. These different types of Support Crew are listed here together in alphabetical order.

Active Voice Lab helps funders, advocates, creatives and other leaders strive together for social justice.

Allied Media Projects uses media, art, and technology to advance a more just and creative world.

Auburn Seminary provides education, research, support, and media savvy leaders to bridge religious divides, build community, pursue justice, and heal the world.

Beautiful Ventures is a creative social enterprise that influences popular culture, disrupts anti-Blackness and elevates perceptions of Black humanity.

Butterfly Lab brings together pro-immigrant leaders to build power for effective narratives that honor the humanity of migrants, refugees, and immigrants, and advance freedom and justice for all.

Center for Cultural Innovation supports individuals in the arts — artists, culture bearers, and creative entrepreneurs — to realize greater self determination so as to unfetter their productivity, expression, and social impact.

Center for Scholars & Storytellers at UCLA is the only youth-centered organization that bridges the gap between social science research and media creation. They collaborate with the creative community to unlock the power of storytelling to help the next generation thrive and grow.

Center for Story-based Strategy cultivates imagination spaces where story, grassroots leadership, organizing, and democracy are interwoven strategies to build power.

Constellations Culture Change Fund is a $23 million, three-year initiative for equity that dismantles narratives that reinforce oppression and domination to create a more just world. It includes investment both in individual Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) culture makers as well as BIPOC-led cultural strategy organizations.

Creative Change brings together a diverse group of leading artists, entertainers, media makers, advocates, activists, and funders committed to transformative social change.

Creative Capital is a nonprofit organization that funds artists in the creation of groundbreaking new work in the visual arts, performing arts, literature, film, technology, and multidisciplinary practices, including socially-engaged work in all forms.

Creative Time commissions and presents ambitious public art projects guided by three core values: art matters, artists' voices are important in shaping society, and public spaces are places for creative and free expression.

Culture Surge is a broad coalition of change-makers connecting key narratives across issues and campaigns — including voting access campaigns and COVID-19 response work — and coordinating resources to maximize the impact of culture-driven initiatives to lead to concrete change.

Doc Society is committed to enabling great documentary films and connecting them to audiences globally. Its Good Pitch program brings together documentary filmmakers with foundations, NGOs, campaigners, philanthropists, policymakers, brands and media around leading social and environmental issues to forge coalitions and campaigns that are good for all these partners, good for the films, and good for society.

FrameWorks Institute uses rigorous social science methods to study how people understand social issues — including racial and economic justice, child and adolescent development, healthy equity, climate change, immigration, justice reform, and education — and develops evidence-based techniques that help researchers, advocates, and practitioners explain those issues more effectively.

frank (University of Florida) is a community for movement builders and changemakers — including strategists, researchers, artists, journalists, students, activists and others— as they use communications to drive positive social, institutional and behavioral change.

Geena Davis Institute is a global research-based organization that works collaboratively within the entertainment industry to create gender balance, foster inclusion, and reduce negative stereotyping in family entertainment media.

Harmony Labs conducts audience, narrative, and story analysis, helping storytellers channel the immense power of audience, story, and narrative to shape our future.

Health Equity Collective is the work of a collective of multidisciplinary justice champions to develop a radical new vision for health equity and design a series of prototypes to bring that vision to life.

The Impact Guild connects, empowers, and activates people who use media, technology, and pop culture for social good and healthy democracies.

Kirk Cheyfitz/Political Narrative works with progressive candidates and causes, setting narrative strategy and telling stories that win.

Liberation Ventures is a field builder fueling America's Black-led racial repair movement.

Midwest Culture Lab is a youth-of-color-led cultural strategy and civic engagement collaborative.

Muslim Narrative Change Cohort assembled a diverse cohort of fellows who use their unique experiences and expertise to develop a roadmap for telling authentic Muslim stories and catalyzing social change.

Narrative Initiative makes connections between people and organizations, amplifying the best tools and methodologies from an emerging field, and activating new collaborations that lead to greater alignment.

Norman Lear Center and Hollywood Health & Society is a research and public policy center at University of Southern California that studies the social, political, economic and cultural impact of entertainment on the world.

Opportunity Agenda is a social justice communication lab that works to advance the impact of the social justice community.

ORS Impact provides research, evaluation, consultation and hands-on coaching to nonprofit, philanthropic, and public-sector organizations to promote actionable learning and guide decision-making and strategy.

RadComms brings together a global cohort of communicators to cross-pollinate conversations across a variety of movements, organizations, levels of experience, geographies, languages, and political associations.

ReFrame invests in people — strategists, creatives, leaders, and dreamers — and helps them develop the skills, acumen, and networks needed to advance just narratives at scale.

Re:Power is a national capacity building and training organization for the progressive movement. They work towards a vision of inclusive politics by offering training and strategic support to leaders and organizations across the progressive ecosystem, focusing on movements, civic engagement, and governance.

Story at Scale was a year-long collaboration of researchers, data scientists, artists, advocates, and organizers to develop and test a new cultural strategy to advance gender justice.

Topos Partnership creates messaging and research and provides insights that are informed by deep expertise in the cognitive and social sciences to help organizations make progress on taxes, reproductive freedom, democracy, and more.

THE BACKERS

Here are examples of different types of Backers who fund and support those On Stage and Backstage: those in traditional foundations and institutional philanthropy; funder affinity groups and regrantors; and media-related venture funds. These different types of Backers are listed here together in alphabetical order.

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation fights poverty, disease, and inequity around the world, with a domestic focus on narrative change efforts geared towards shifting perceptions around economic mobility and opportunity.

Chicken & Egg Pictures supports women nonfiction filmmakers whose artful and innovative storytelling catalyzes social change.

Color Congress is a national collective of majority POC and POC-led organizations aimed at centering and strengthening nonfiction storytelling by, for, and about people of color.

Compton Foundation is spending down by 2025, but for 75 years it has advanced peace, a healthy environment, reproductive justice, and a flourishing democracy.

Convergence Partnership is a national funder collaborative working to transform policies, practices, and systems to advance racial justice and health equity.

Culture Change Fund uses culture change strategies to accelerate a new way of thinking that centers gender, racial, and economic justice at the heart of the solution to any systemic problem.

Ford Foundation seeks to reduce poverty and injustice, strengthen democratic values, promote international cooperation, and advance human achievement.

Impact Partners is dedicated to funding independent documentary storytelling that entertains audiences, engages with pressing social issues, and propels the art of cinema forward.

Media Impact Funders is a membership organization that advances the work of a broad range of funders committed to effective use and support of media in the public interest.

The Nathan Cummings Foundation is rooted in the Jewish tradition of social justice and works to create a more just, vibrant, sustainable, and democratic society.

New Media Ventures supports entrepreneurs and activists and moves the field of impact investing forward by investing flexibly across startups — for profit and nonprofit, mission-driven and political.

Open Society Foundations supports organizations working for justice, democratic governance, and human rights around the world.

Pop Culture Collaborative is a philanthropic resource and funder learning community working to transform the narrative landscape in America around people of color, immigrants, refugees, Muslims, and Indigenous peoples, especially those who are women, queer, transgender and/or disabled.

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation works to improve health and healthcare in the United States. Its work is rooted in equity, and it works to provide every individual with a fair and just opportunity for health and well-being, no matter who they are, where they live, or how much money they have.

Starfish Accelerator is a creative IP accelerator designed to scale big pop culture ideas from proven BIPOC artists, creators, and makers. Its community is a collective of artists, entrepreneurs, cultural change strategists and dreamers.

Unbound Philanthropy seeks to contribute to a vibrant, welcoming society and an immigration system rooted in justice.

APPENDIX 3: CONSULTED MATERIALS

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