

NARRATIVE CHANGE AND IMPACT

Analysis of In-Depth Interviews with Experts, Practitioners,
and Funders in the Narrative Change Field

April 2023

USC Norman Lear Center
Media Impact Project

This deck is based on research funded by the California Health Care Foundation (CHCF). The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of CHCF.

Table of Contents

1. Executive Summary
2. Project Overview
3. Key Findings and Recommendations
4. Methods
5. Findings
 - State of the Field
 - Successes and Impact Factors
 - Challenges in the Field
6. Ways Forward
7. Appendix A: References
8. Appendix B: Interview Protocols
9. Appendix C: Interview Analysis Codes



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Project Overview

Interest in narrative change approaches has been increasing over the last several years in the advocacy and philanthropic worlds.

With support from the California Health Care Foundation, the USC Norman Lear Center embarked on a learning project to:

- Explore what is needed to generate impact through entertainment-driven narrative change
- Align impact expectations among key stakeholders

As part of the larger learning project, we interviewed 23 key stakeholders in the narrative change field, with a focus on those leveraging entertainment media:

- 9 representatives from funding and philanthropic organizations
- 9 representatives from practitioner organizations
- 5 narrative change experts and consultants

Key Concepts

Several key concepts informed the interview analysis.*

Narrative change: a concerted effort to challenge, modify, and/or replace existing narratives that perpetuate inequities (Kalra et al., 2021), increasingly used by nonprofit and advocacy organizations as a means to advance social impact goals.

Narrative Power: the capacity of a narrative change effort — whether based at the community level, popular culture, or the mass media level — to shift public discourses, policies, and mindsets (Moore & Sen, 2022; Robinson, 2018)

Infrastructure: systems associated with narrative power including organizational resources, leadership development, coalition building, and engaging artists and communities to create and disseminate new narratives (Kalra et al., 2021).

Trust-based Philanthropy: a partnership model focused on the needs and capacities of all stakeholders (National Philanthropic Trust, 2022), and often involves unrestricted, multi-year grantmaking.

Narrative change practitioners: professionals actively deploying narrative-based approaches in their social impact work, largely focused on social justice objectives.

*Although not all interviewees used the same definitions of key terms, we provide definitions aligned with the majority of interviewees and reference materials. In particular, “power” has multiple meanings within the field, including shifts in entertainment industry power structures and power-building in the context of community organizing. See sources in Appendix A.

Key Findings

State of the Field

1. Interviewees relied on **different definitions** of “narrative change” but highlighted **similar issues** in the field – long time-horizons, infrastructure needs, and lack of control – and employed **similar tactics**, such as working with entertainment media, social media, community-based, and policy-focused organizations.

2. Among interviewed representatives of the narrative change field, there was near-consensus that **narrative change** is **gaining ground** and **influence** as a powerful strategy to promote social justice and social change.

State of the Field, *continued*

Key Findings

3. Funders were more likely to highlight **dissemination** and **relationship-building** as considerations for establishing connections and channels to shift narratives.

4. Funders also mentioned **resistance** from foundation leadership to innovative and time-intensive narrative change work and pointed to the **effectiveness of impactful examples** – e.g., research studies, examples of other funders' buy-in – to lower resistance.

5. Practitioners called for **new philanthropic approaches** which focus on **trust** and encourage **flexible, experimental, and iterative work** that could include message testing and learning opportunities for organizations in the growing field.

Successes & Impact Factors

Key Findings

6. Interviewees highlighted **historical narrative change wins**, frequently citing: the U.S. **marriage equality campaign**, **anti-tobacco** work, normalization of **seatbelt use** and **designated drivers**, **Black Lives Matter**, and **#MeToo**.

7. **Factors** identified with **narrative change wins** included: large-scale **funding** and **duration**, **trust-based investments** in **narrative power**, **relationships**, and **infrastructures**, **message saturation**,* **activation of multiple social spheres**, such as social movements and mass media, consideration of **topic** or **narratives** across topics, **connections to external context**, and an emphasis on **entertainment value**.

*Message saturation here refers to the diffusion and spread of messages related to target narratives across various channels (mediums, genres, social media platforms), social spheres, and media products.

Challenges in the Field

8. Practitioners pointed to a **lack of control** over project timelines and outcomes, such as whether a media project gets greenlighted, as a significant challenge when working with the entertainment industry.

- They wanted funders to better understand the way the entertainment industry works and its unpredictability.

9. All interviewed groups brought up the challenge of **the long time-horizon** to see fruits of narrative change efforts, which **challenges current norms in philanthropy**.

- It can take 3+ years to see effects of a new TV show or 20+ years to see effects of a major public health campaign like the anti-tobacco work in the U.S.
- Successful narrative change efforts often involve distributed cross-sector and organizational collaboration which call for new philanthropic models.

Challenges in the Field, *continued*

10. Working towards **message saturation*** was discussed as an important, but challenging, factor in the current media landscape.

- Media fragmentation and echo chambers are seen as barriers to achieving the dominance of messages and narratives.
- Powerful opposition forces driving harmful narratives and disinformation were also perceived as an impediment to progressive narrative change efforts.

11. In terms of the challenge of measuring **impact**, interviewees highlighted the importance of:

- Measuring narrative changes *incrementally, cumulatively, and holistically* through **innovative tools** (e.g., social listening);
- Networking and learning from relevant work with **field-wide conversations and convenings** (e.g., conferences).

*Message saturation here refers to the diffusion and spread of messages related to target narratives across various channels, social spheres, and media products.

Emerging Recommendations for Grantmaking

Support strategic collaborations* among organizations and groups that can promote target narratives in multiple social spheres.

Prioritize efforts to build infrastructures and power in grantee organizations and the field when designing narrative change initiatives.

Consider building in innovative research, learning, and evaluation opportunities that help grantees capture incremental impacts, iterate and grow capacity in their work.

Make the case for narrative change efforts that build on existing relevant efforts with the long-term time horizon in mind.

*Interviews and existing research support longer-term (3+ years) concurrent and sequential collaborations across issues and sectors.



PROJECT OVERVIEW

Project Overview: The Learning Project

- Interest in narrative change approaches has been increasing over the last several years in the advocacy and philanthropic worlds.
- Narrative change refers to efforts to challenge, modify, and/or replace existing narratives with new ones focused on social good and equity.
- This learning project explores what is needed to generate social impact through entertainment-driven* narrative change approaches.

*Within the scope of this project, entertainment media refers to screen-based mass media such as television and film.

Project Overview: The Learning Project

The first phase includes:

- Interviews with stakeholders in the narrative change field
- A landscape analysis of research on the impact of entertainment media in the U.S. and Canada*

The second phase includes:

- An analysis of entertainment-driven narrative change investments through a case study of the Lear Center's Hollywood, Health & Society program
- An evidence-based framework of best practices, distilling key factors that help maximize the impact of narrative change

*To request a copy of the landscape analysis when it is made public, please email danawein@usc.edu.

We interviewed 23 key stakeholders:

- To learn about the state of the narrative change field
- To better understand barriers and opportunities to narrative change success
- To identify areas of alignment and misalignment between key funders and practitioners of narrative change

While the design of this project centered narrative efforts leveraging entertainment, most interviewees described narrative change across different contexts and spheres. Thus, insights apply beyond the context of entertainment media.



METHODS

To investigate the narrative change field, we interviewed a range of professionals with an emphasis on philanthropies and organizations working to leverage entertainment media for social change*:

- 9 representatives from funding and philanthropic organizations
- 9 representatives from practitioner organizations
- 5 narrative change experts and consultants

*Not all participants refer to their work as “narrative change.” Participants were chosen to represent a wide variety of approaches, target narratives and topics, and organizations.

Narrative Change Funders



Tracy van Slyke, Chief Strategy Officer, Pop Culture Collaborative

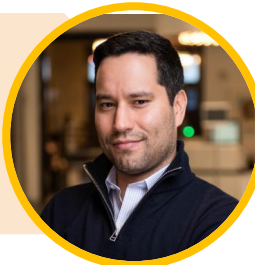


Mari Nicholson, Director of Communications for The SCAN Foundation

Mona Shah, Director of Research, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation



Felipe Cala, Advocacy Director, Open Society–Latin America and the Caribbean at Open Society Foundations



Jen Humke, Senior Program Officer, Journalism & Media, MacArthur Foundation



Abiah Weaver, Director, Strategic Communications, Omidyar Network

Emilia Javorsky, Director of Grants & Multistakeholder Engagements, Future of Life Institute



Demetrius Parker, Health Communication Specialist and Cultural Communication Strategist, Center for Disease Control (CDC)



Research
Methods:
Interviewees

Narrative Change Practitioners



Melissa Sun, Sr. Director of Entertainment Partnerships, Sierra Club



Meredith Goldberg-Morse, Director, Social Impact at MTV Entertainment Studios



Ishita Srivastava, Chief of Narrative & Culture Change, Caring Across Generations



Daniel Hinerfeld, Director of Rewrite the Future at NRDC



Charlene Jimenez, Director of Entertainment Partnerships & Advocacy, Define American



Melanie Meinzer, Learning & Impact Strategist, The Center for Cultural Power



Trevor Smith, Director of Narrative Change at Liberation Ventures



Haleh Hatami, Impact Advisor, The Center for Cultural Power

Narrative Change Practitioners, *continued*



Kate Folb, Director,
Hollywood, Health &
Society at USC Norman
Lear Center

Interviewee, executive at an
entertainment advocacy
organization*



Two interviewees,
executives at cultural
organizing nonprofit

*Interviewee names and organizations were anonymized upon their request.

Narrative Change Experts and Consultants

Research
Methods:
Interviewees



Liz Manne, Co-founder & Principal, Story Strategy Group



Mandy Van Deven, Founder & Principal, Both/And Solutions

Brett Davidson, Principal, Wingseed



Nikki Kalra, Senior Consultant, ORS Impact



Interviewee, co-founder, nonprofit focused on the impact of media, tech, and pop culture

Semi-Structured Interview Overview

Interview questions* focused on 4 areas:

1. Contextual information, including definitions, contexts, topics, challenges, and promises of narrative change work generally, with an emphasis on work leveraging entertainment
2. Obstacles and successes of *specific* narrative change projects, along with common factors that could have led to those outcomes
3. Defining and measuring the impact of narrative change efforts
4. Aligning funders and practitioners of narrative change

*To see the full list of interview questions, see Appendix B. Although questions focused on entertainment media for narrative change, most interviewees spoke about narrative change across contexts and spheres.

Coding and Analyzing the Interviews

Based on the research objectives, we developed codes to tag, compile, and analyze the topics and themes in the interviews.

- 41 codes* were organized into 5 categories:
 1. Definitions
 2. Wins
 3. Factors
 4. Framework
 5. Challenges
- Analysis involved two rounds of coding of the transcribed interviews, conducted by two researchers using the qualitative research software, ATLAS.Ti.

*See Appendix C for the complete list of codes.



FINDINGS: STATE OF THE FIELD



The narrative change field has areas of alignment and misalignment between groups of stakeholders.

Areas of Alignment

Across groups, there was alignment on key ground tactics of narrative change work including leveraging mass media, entertainment, and social media along with relevant social movement and policy work.

An acknowledged challenge was working with the long time-horizons needed for narrative shifts in culture.

Areas of Misalignment

Definitions and underlying theories of both 'narrative' and 'narrative change' varied. Some framed the narrative change approach strategically for different audiences.

Funders and practitioners emphasized different issues and factors at play in successful narrative change initiatives.

Interviewees expressed that it's important to work towards a common definition of narrative change.

We gathered feedback on a definition of narrative change from ORS Impact that was informed by multiple reports in the field:

“*Narrative change is the effort to challenge, modify, or replace existing narratives that perpetuate inequity and uphold an unjust status quo, through the creation and deployment of new or different narratives. In part, [it] is geared toward...shifting the 'underlying values and beliefs' that get activated around a certain issue. It is also...about developing the infrastructure to make those shifts powerful.*”

(Kalra et al., 2022, p. 6)

Interviewees agreed: *narrative change* includes shifting big-picture understandings and is not strategic communications.

- Strategic communications is more short-term, issue-based, and siloed than narrative change.
- The feedback on the offered definition of narrative change was mostly positive.
- The consensus was that the definition captured key elements, but was too long.
- Some felt the definition was too political and others found it too apolitical.
 - Some said it should explicitly center values of antiracism, equity, and social justice.
 - Others questioned centering equity when narrative strategies can be applied toward many goals.

”

Because we are so focused on the short term strategic communications needs and not the long term narrative change mental model shifting, we are just always putting out fires both on the funding side and the practitioner side.



Trevor Smith,
Practitioner,
Liberation
Ventures

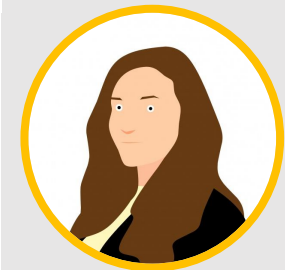
Some said they customize language used depending on the target audience.

Practitioners and funders strategically vary their framing and language when discussing narrative change with those inside or outside the field.

- When speaking with others in the narrative change field, interviewees reported using terms like *narrative change* or *culture change*.
- When speaking with those outside the field (e.g., the public, policymakers, TV writers) interviewees use language they see as more neutral: *education*, *building understanding*, or *encouraging accuracy and authenticity*.



If I'm talking to funders that are interested in narrative change, then yes, I use that term. But if I'm talking to the entertainment industry, I don't use narrative change. It sounds too wonky and academic-y, and it also can put up their hackles a little bit like, 'oh, is this propaganda? Are you coming to me with an agenda?'



Anonymous Practitioner

Power is an important concept, used in interconnected ways:

- **Narrative power** referred to capacity for narratives and the larger narrative change effort to achieve the kinds of impact it sets out to have.
- **Structural power** contributes to narrative power by disrupting power structures.
 - Representation, infrastructure, and redistribution of decision-making ability were seen as *conduits* to narrative power, allowing affected communities to have a “seat at the table” and are able to shape narratives important to their lived experiences.
- **Community power** is linked to community organizing and local movements that help shift policies and norms.
 - Some saw community power a strategy to gain narrative power, some saw it as a separate albeit connected goal.

”

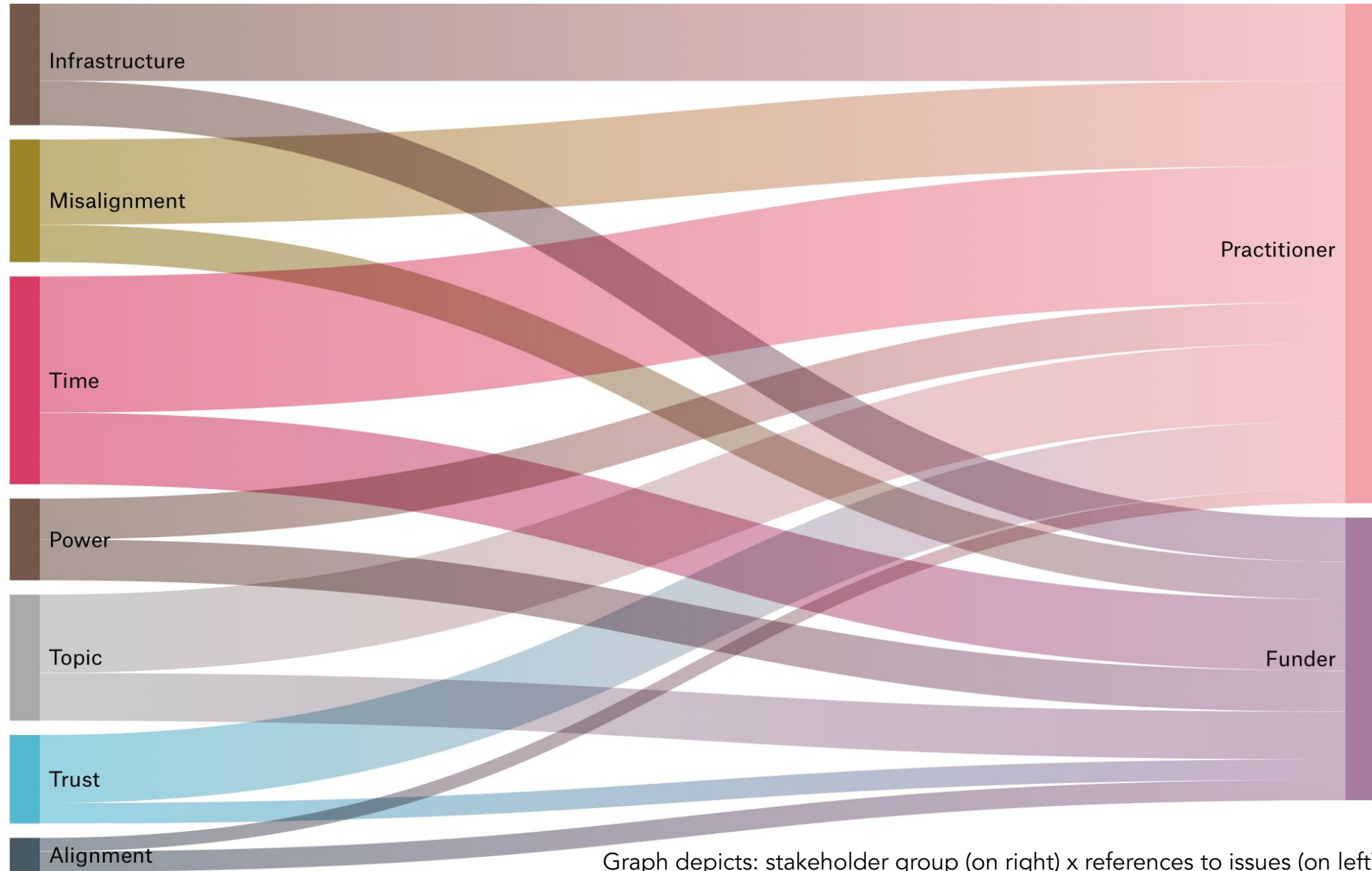
[As Rashad Robinson has pointed out], narrative change is not just about the presence of narratives, but how they're made powerful. I think that's definitely something that has been central to thinking through narrative change, particularly in terms of the kinds of changes that are meaningful and how we do this work.



Nikki Kalra,
Expert

Narrative change funders and practitioners highlighted similar sets of issues, but emphasized them differently

Key Issues



Narrative change funders and practitioners highlighted similar sets of issues, but emphasized them differently

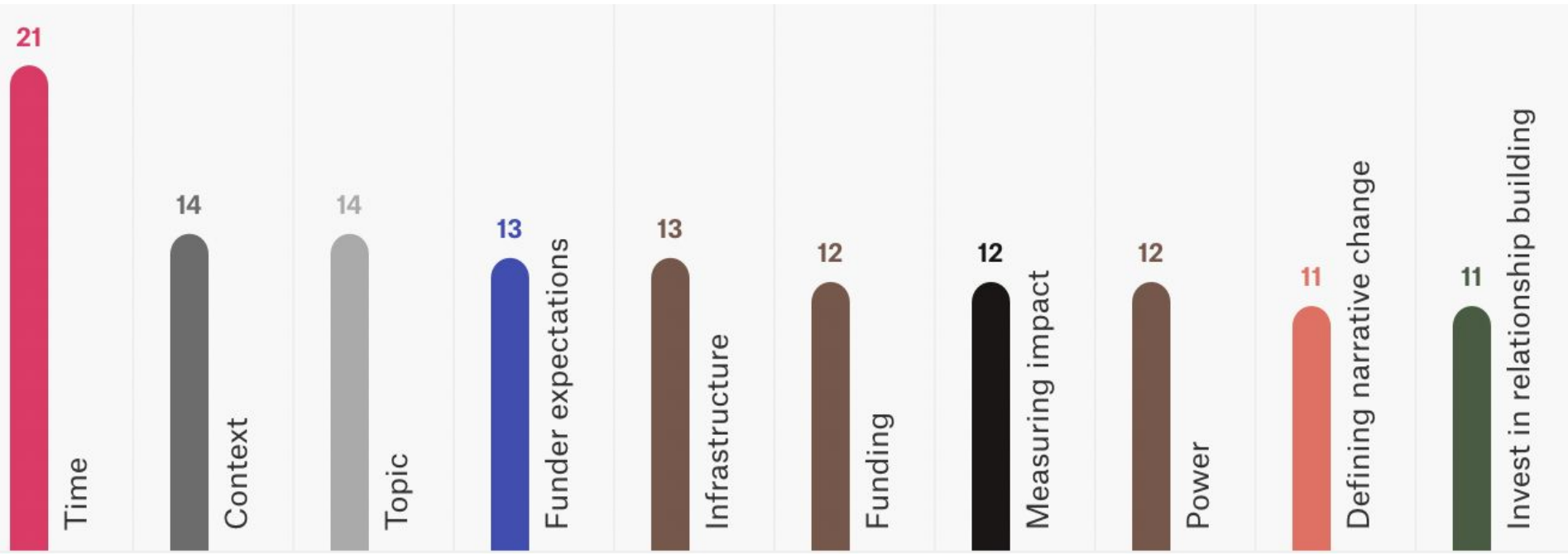
Key Issues

- Funders and practitioners were almost equally likely to bring up the issue of long time-horizons in narrative change projects, since typical philanthropic initiatives call for demonstrable results in 1 or 2 years.
- Funders were a lot more likely to mention resistance from their leadership to narrative change work, in part due to its novel and experimental nature. They were slightly more likely to bring up areas of general alignment between funders and practitioners and the importance of power-building.
- Practitioners were a lot more likely to speak about issues of trust and trust-based philanthropy. They were slightly more likely to mention infrastructure, especially at the organization level.

Key Issues Funders

Top issues mentioned by funders included time, infrastructure, topic, power, and relationships.

- For funders, successful narrative change investments build in:
- Time: target narrative change effort time periods mentioned ranged from 3 to 20 years
 - Infrastructure: including helping organizations learn, grow capacity and relationships, and expand narrative expertise
 - Connections to the current sociopolitical context

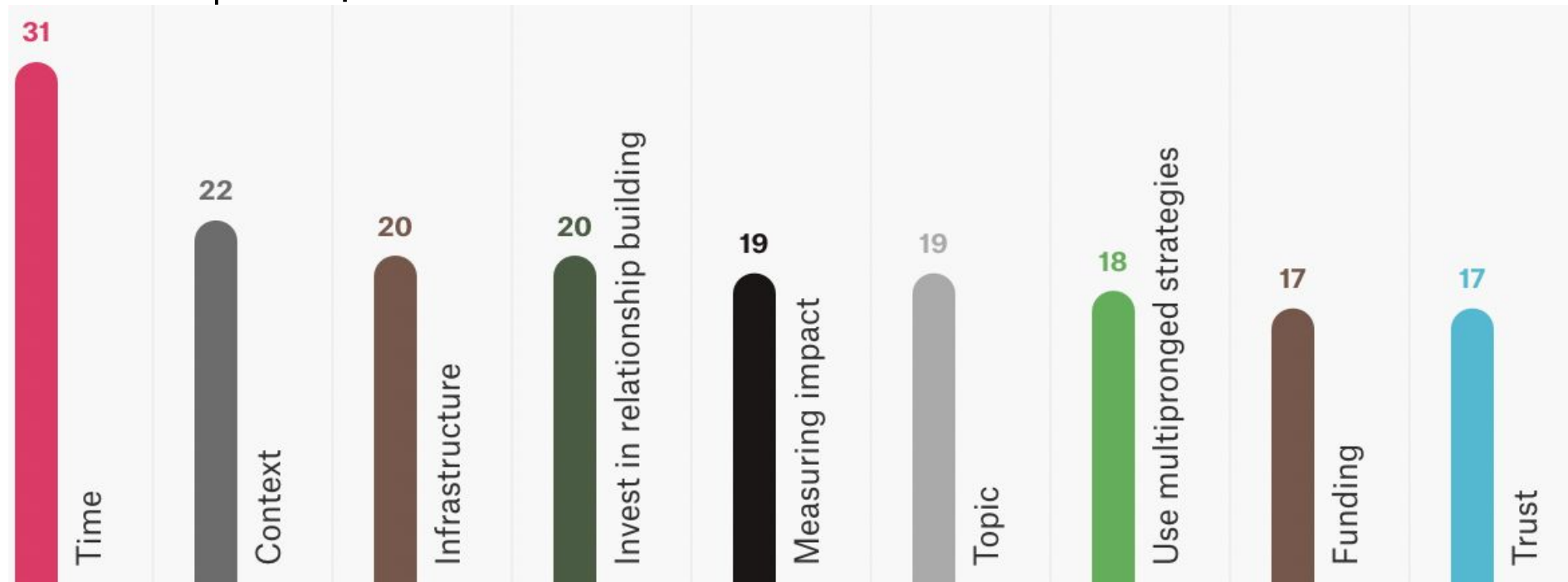


Key Issues Practitioners

Top issues mentioned by practitioners included time, context, infrastructure, trust, investment in relationships, measuring impact, and the use of multi-pronged strategies.

For practitioners, successful narrative change investments:

- Incorporate longer time-horizons and connect to the sociopolitical context
- Are based on trust and develop organizational infrastructure
- Include strategies for activating multiple spheres and addressing multiple topics



Areas of misalignment

Interviewees defined and theorized narrative change in different ways, but applied similar sets of strategies in practice.

Interviewees' theories on the relationship between narrative and culture varied.*

- Some called the strategy itself "narrative change," while others called it "cultural strategy" or "impact storytelling."

There is more alignment on the ground than in definitions.

Some interviewees expressed frustration with an emphasis on terminology in field conversations and reports, which could obscure the field's overall on-the-ground alignment in aims, activities, and strategies.

*Some theorized the relationship as narrative being a subset of culture, whereas others viewed culture as a subset of narrative.

”

To the degree that people separate pop culture strategies from narrative strategies, or they separate strat comms [strategic communications] from organizing, I think folks are doing a disservice to both the extraordinary and singular power of storytelling.



Liz Manne,
Expert/
Consultant,
Story
Strategy Group

Areas of misalignment

Areas of misalignment between funders and practitioners of narrative change included timelines, scopes, and creative control.

Funding timelines, cycles and scopes:

- Practitioners and experts noted that many funders don't grasp or implement the long time-horizons (ranges from 3-20 years were mentioned) or the scale of resources needed to achieve narrative change impact.

Control over creative work:

- Practitioners expressed that funders of entertainment-driven narrative change projects need to better understand creatives in the entertainment industry and that grantees have limited control over if, when, and how content gets made or aired.

”

There's a bit of a disconnect between the way grantmaking is set up and how this work [actually] happens, or the amount that is in our control. . . For example, I've decided not to [produce our own content], because we can [have control] and make the best content, but who's going to see it? So now we mostly [partner with other folks creating content], [but] the minute that becomes the case, we don't have much control over timelines or even whether something actually gets made.



Ishita Srivastava,
Practitioner,
Caring Across
Generations



FINDINGS: SUCCESSSES & FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH IMPACT



SUCCESSSES & FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH IMPACT

Narrative Change Successes

Frequently mentioned narrative change “wins” included:

- Marriage equality in the U.S
- Public health campaigns including anti-tobacco, designated driver, and seatbelt work
- Black Lives Matter
- The #MeToo Movement

Factors Associated with Impact

Common factors interviewees identified as linked to impact include:

- Building in sufficient time and funding
- Building narrative power & infrastructure
- Considering topics vs. deep narratives
- Investing in relationship building, collaboration, and trust
- Using multi-pronged strategies
- Working towards message saturation
- Connecting to sociopolitical context
- Centering entertainment value

Cited Narrative Change Wins in the Interviews

Historical narrative change successes involved efforts on multiple fronts.

Interviewees identified historical narrative change “wins,” often citing:

- The marriage equality campaign in the U.S.
- Public health campaigns including:
 - Anti-tobacco work
 - Normalization of designated drivers
 - Seatbelt use popularization
- The Black Lives Matter movement
- The #MeToo movement

”

The marriage equality fight was a big win. Based on our research, the Pop Culture Collaborative team found that while people credit Ellen and Will & Grace, it actually was a narrative systems strategy, activated by a narrative network of creators, social justice movements, industry leaders, politicians, journalists, and more that created this [cultural] surround sound experience.



Tracy Van Slyke,
Funder,
Pop Culture
Collaborative

Factors Associated with Impact in the Interviews

1. Time

The most frequently mentioned factor associated with impact was long-term duration.

- Interviewees pointed to the importance of thinking of narrative change as a long-term strategy with long time-horizons for impact.
- Grantees articulated timelines of 3+ years for TV and film to air and 20+ years to see large-scale public health and public opinion changes.

2. Funding

Having sufficient funding for the scope of the effort was the second most frequently mentioned factor associated with success.

- Time, scope, and funding are connected: long-term funding often requires a larger scale of investment.

”

The bottom line [is] this [work] takes time [. . .] there are ways along the way that we can show proof of concept, but no one should enter it thinking it's something that can happen in a year around a certain topic.



Haleh Hatami,
Practitioner,
Center for
Cultural Power

3. Power & Infrastructure



Having the infrastructure in place to build narrative power was also seen as a necessary factor to achieve impact.

- Many interviewees talked about infrastructure needed to build power in relation to 'who's at the table?' and putting systems into place to facilitate a more equitable distribution of power in the media industry and in society.
- For interviewees, infrastructure embeds the question of whose voices are centered and who holds power in the narrative change field, in the entertainment industry, and in policymaking.



Power and decision-making are really important. So who is green-lighting projects, who is directing projects, who is making casting choices, who are the show runners? Not just representation in front of the camera, which is obviously important. But also who has the power to decide what stories get told and how? And who has power to influence and intervene with them?"



Liz Manne,
Expert/
Consultant,
Story
Strategy Group

4. Impactful Topics



Interviewees were split on whether certain topics are more ripe for impact than others.

- Some interviewees see *concrete* topics as easier targets for narrative change interventions leveraging media, as opposed to more *abstract* topics.
 - Examples were particular health issues and actions, such as getting screened for breast cancer, as opposed to more abstract topics, like climate change.
 - Abstract topics were seen as more challenging and need experienced storytellers to make them feel more tangible, personal, and relevant.



Health issues, everybody can relate to... It's easy to tell a TV show, "Hey, you've never done an episode on heart disease, so here's the stats and the audiences that benefit." But to go to a show and say, "Climate change is really important," [they'd say] "Well, climate change isn't about a person"... So, the first 10 years of our work was really helping writers tell a story about a person, a family, or a community [impacted by climate].



Kate Folb,
Practitioner,
Hollywood,
Health & Society

Factors
Associated
with Impact in
the Interviews

4. Impactful Topics, *continued*

- Several interviewees felt that topic-specific work misses the point of narrative change, as narratives hold multiple topics and stories.
 - Examples of topic-specific work included social issues such as climate change.
 - Examples of overarching narratives were “abundance vs. scarcity” and “collectivism vs. individualism.”
- Topic-based work seemed more prominent for health-focused funders and practitioners.
- Some discussed funders’ tendency to think and fund in terms of topic-based campaigns or “issue silos” as holding the field back.

”

[Funders will say], “I’m funding climate,” [or] “I’m funding health or a particular disease.” [But] if we really want to make narrative shift, we have to find the underlying connections, because all of these issues are connected. Climate’s connected to racial justice is connected to health, and [therefore] we have to fund in a connected way, rather than in silos.



Brett Davidson,
Expert

5. Relationship Building, Collaboration, and Trust



Investing in relationships, collaboration, and ultimately, trust-building was also singled out as a critical factor to achieving impact.

- Interviewees referred to building relationships and collaborations both within the narrative change field and in related industries, such as entertainment.
- Some practitioners and experts also discussed trust-based philanthropy and the importance of having funders' trust and buy-in to do the work, experiment, and take risks.



Trust is a huge part of the equation because I don't think we can be prescriptive about the way that this [work] goes. Context matters, things shift and change, so people have to be responsive. [. . .] I think that [we need] a more trust-based approach to fund these efforts and trust the people who are really working to shift power to do that.



Nikki Kalra,
Expert

Factors
Associated
with Impact in
the Interviews

6. Multi-Pronged Strategies



Interviewees emphasized that narrative change is one strategy among multiple related strategies for creating meaningful change.

- Impactful efforts use multi-pronged strategies, including incorporating policy advocacy, organizing, popular media, and strategic communications into narrative change efforts.
- Interviewees highlighted the connection to grassroots social movements as important for achieving narrative change.
 - This connection was seen as critical to building power for and within communities who are most impacted by harmful narratives.



Narrative change can't be done in silo. It has to be done in partnership with power-building, movement-building, and strategic communications. [Narrative change strategies] are part of the tactics being used, but they can't alone be effective.



Mona
Shah,
Funder,
RWJF

7. Message Saturation



Interviewees discussed that the repetition of messages across channels and spheres leads to message saturation, and ultimately, narrative immersion or dominance.

- Message saturation takes time and coordination among multiple stakeholder groups and platforms, with the ultimate goal of making a new or modified narrative the norm.
- Practitioners emphasized the importance of “beating the drum,” especially when it comes to repeatedly getting messages out through the entertainment industry.



In narrative change, the ultimate goal is dominance. And hopefully you have dominance for the right issues.

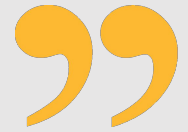


Abiah
Weaver,
Omidyar
Network

8. Sociopolitical Context

Considering and incorporating the sociopolitical context of a given narrative emerged as another factor associated with impact.

- Interviewees connected context to the field's ability to rapidly respond to key political or cultural moments.
- Leveraging the sociopolitical context to expand cultural discussions was seen as an important strategy (e.g., organizing campaigns when relevant events raise consciousness or when relevant issues are raised in the media)



You can't always plan for this stuff. You just need to have the field in place. The people that are prepared, connected and resourced, so that when you're in these linchpin moments when George Floyd was murdered and it's a global pandemic, and the world is paying attention and every celebrity is sitting at home on their couch and wants to do something, we're like, "All right, we're ready."



Anonymous
Practitioner

9. Entertainment Value



Practitioners highlighted the importance of prioritizing the entertainment value of media projects when leveraging entertainment for narrative change.

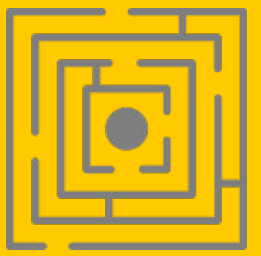
- Telling a “good story” was seen as key to achieving impact through media.
- Entertainment value relates to the power of storytelling and the potential of entertainment to shift public attitudes without being didactic.



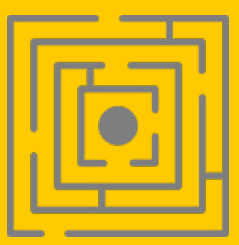
Success looks like giving viewers spinach when they think they're eating popcorn. [. . .] I would never want someone watching [to feel like] "Oh, my favorite show has suddenly become very didactic" [. . .] I want people to have their perceptions and assumptions challenged without necessarily feeling like that's the intention of the show or we're hitting them over the head with it.



Meredith
Goldberg-Morse,
Practitioner,
MTV
Entertainment Studios



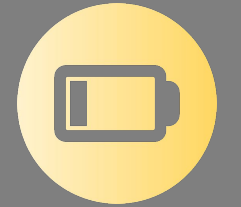
FINDINGS: CHALLENGES



CHALLENGES

Key challenges to narrative change work identified by interviewees included:

1. Lack of control over outcomes in entertainment-facing work
2. Narrow philanthropic models with short timeframes
3. Barriers in working towards message saturation
4. Difficulties measuring impact in innovative ways, with ways to capture cultural, societal, and cumulative mindset effects



Challenges



1. Interviewees pointed to a lack of control over project outcomes in projects that leverage entertainment.

- Practitioners shared that they often don't have control over whether an entertainment media project gets produced or greenlit.
- This lack of control affects project timelines and outcomes, which complicates common philanthropic models.



I wish funders had a better idea of how Hollywood actually works, which is that projects get developed in a multitude of ways. It's not a science, it's an art, and bridging those two is difficult to do.



Melissa Sun,
Practitioner,
Sierra Club



2. Narrow or overly prescriptive funding models present barriers to narrative change work.

- Some suggested funders need to broaden the model from focusing on a single topic to the larger, overarching narrative that underpins multiple topics.
- Philanthropic investment needs to scale up and center trust and flexibility in order to effect narrative change, according to most of the interviewed practitioners.
- Practitioners saw larger investments, multi-year grants, and general operating support as most effective for narrative change work.
- Co-funding was mentioned a way to provide practitioners with the scale of resources needed, while spreading out individual risks for funders.



Funders will want to change a narrative about climate, but without talking about the multifaceted ways that humans are affected by the climate crisis. If funders are seeing through a narrow, myopic lens, then they aren't actually working at the level of deep narrative change.



Andy Van Deven,
Expert,
Both/And
Solutions

Challenges



3. Working towards message saturation is important, but challenging.

Mentioned barriers to saturation across channels included:

- Media fragmentation and echo chambers
 - Consumers have endless entertainment options and can choose content in line with their preexisting ideologies.
 - A fragmented media landscape presents difficulties in reaching target audiences.
- Powerful and well-funded* opposition forces
 - Interviewees mentioned right-wing narrative organizations, alt-right media, disinformation campaigns as examples.
 - Some interviewees saw these as hindering progressive narrative change efforts.



We spend all this money, do all this work, fight like hell. And if we do not understand the countervailing forces and countervailing winds including narrative, then we're just not going to get as far as we want.



Anonymous
Consultant/
Expert

*In the U.S., conservative movements have been known to consistently invest in co-funding and unrestricted funding models to advance their causes (Mayer, 2016).



4. Measuring narrative change impact requires new approaches

Cited challenges related to measuring impact of narrative change work included:

- The need to reframe impact measurement and evaluation as practices for *organizational and field-wide learning and iterating*, rather than fulfilling funder or grant requirements.
- Difficulty showing causation or directly linking the organization's work to broader cultural changes.
- Traditional formats of impact measurement getting in the way of doing more experimental or innovative work.
 - For example, interviewees considered discourse and power analysis in addition to surveys



Evaluate [grantees] based on their long term narrative goals, but [also] their goals to get to that long term vision. What are they learning, building, and doing that's advancing their knowledge and getting them closer to [their goals]? Then fund their ability to evaluate and iterate. [So] then over time it's being able to look at the narrative shift and the field as a whole.



Tracy Van Slyke,
Funder,
Pop Culture
Collaborative



4. Measuring narrative change impact requires new approaches, *continued*

- **Measuring organizational capacity:** growth in the organization's readiness to do meaningful narrative work
- **Focusing on incremental impacts:** pulse checks using social media, mass media, and polls to assess message spread to see if the effort is on the right track
- **Using message testing:** building in opportunities to experiment with messages, media, and narratives
- **Dissemination effectiveness:** the ability of created messages and media to reach target audiences and channels



It's shifting [funders'] mindsets around what impact really looks like and not quantifying [in] a one to one [way], like this dollar helps this person, but really helping to understand what it means to shift a narrative and how to measure that in a way that aligns with their investment.



Anonymous Practitioner



4. Measuring narrative change impact requires new approaches, continued

- Rethinking long-term impact metrics
 - Policy changes and public opinion polls were noted as gold standard long-term metrics for narrative change.
 - However, interviewees mentioned that law and policy changes, especially in the U.S., often do not represent popular opinion and large-scale mindsets.
 - Cited examples included LGBTQ policies and reproductive rights in the U.S.
 - Because policy and culture are not in lockstep, long-term narrative change cannot be measured by policy change alone.



People often point to marriage equality and "love is love" as a narrative change win. But we're not even 10 years past the legalization of same-sex marriage in the US, and look at the state of LGBTQ rights, broadly speaking. Also, the fact that the Supreme Court is well-primed to overturn that decision shows that it's false to conflate a momentary policy gain with successful narrative change.



Mandy Van Deven,
Expert,
Both/And
Solutions



WAYS FORWARD

Practitioners proposed long-term, flexible, trust-based funding, deeper understanding, and more investment in infrastructure:

- **Long-term, flexible, trust-based funding:**
They proposed less restrictive or unrestricted funding commitments that allow for experimentation.
- **Investments in infrastructure:**
Funding infrastructural growth — specifically capacity building in individual organizations and the field — was highlighted as a path forward to achieving more impact at scale.
- **Acknowledgement of unpredictability in entertainment:**
Practitioners using entertainment strategies wanted funders to better understand the lack of control over outcomes when leveraging entertainment media.

Funders expressed a need for more education, evidence, and collaboration:

- **More funder education:** Funders want to learn more about what impact at scale through narrative change efforts entails, to enable buy-in from leadership and larger investments.
- **More evidence of direct impact of narrative change investments on mindsets at scale:** There is a need to show evidence of large-scale impact on broad mindsets related to society, equity, and justice. Evidence was also discussed in the context of identifying better measures of incremental progress on mindset change.
- **More collaborative funding:** Co-funding was mentioned as a pathway for maximizing resources to grantees, while minimizing the risk of investment to each funder.

Development of the narrative change field requires for more funding, shared learning, and experimentation:

- Funding and convening a collaborative narrative change network to share relevant learnings, tools, and insights was considered one way forward through shared learning.
- Interviewees expressed that narrative change requires:
 - Experimentation (e.g., to test messages and try out various strategies)
 - Methods to capture diffuse impacts on mindsets and culture
 - Ability to learn from successful frameworks used by others in the field
 - Evaluation designs focused on helping the organization learn and iterate

Shared measurement and learning strategies can improve the field's understanding of individual and collective impact.

Interviewees expressed the desire for a shared evaluation methods that could address:

- Pathways for impact at different levels (e.g., organizational, community, society)
- Capturing impact on organizational power and infrastructure (e.g., growing capacity to effect change, redistributing power in organizational leadership)
- Ways to understand narrative change impact holistically, critically, and incrementally
- Examples of metrics to track to show incremental progress
- Comparisons and connections to other social change strategies (e.g., lobbying, advertising, organizing)

Developing a common framework will promote greater alignment in the field.

As the final step in this learning project, we are developing a framework to guide decisions around investments in entertainment-driven narrative change. Elements of this framework may include:

- The saturation of a narrative or topic in the media and the world
- The entertainment value embedded in the media project leveraged for narrative change
- Strength of relationships, collaboration, and trust behind narrative change efforts
- The presence of multipronged strategies targeting narratives
- The narrative infrastructure and power dynamics driving narratives
- The sociopolitical context surrounding narrative change efforts



APPENDICES

References Cited

Appendix A: References

Kalra, N., Farfan, C. B., Robles, L., & Stachowiak, S. (2021). [Measuring narrative change: Understanding progress and navigating complexity](#). ORS Impact.

Mayer, J. (2016). *Dark money: The hidden history of the billionaires behind the rise of the radical right*. Penguin Random House.

Moore, M., & Sen, R. (2022). *Funding narrative change, an assessment and framework by the Convergence Partnership*. The Convergence Partnership.
<https://convergencepartnership.org/resource/funding-narrative-change>

Rush, A. (2022, March 16). [Trust-based philanthropy: A primer for donors](#). National Philanthropic Trust.

Robinson, R. (2018, April 18). [Changing our narrative about narrative: The infrastructure required for building narrative power](#). Color of Change.

Interview Protocol for Funders

Appendix B: Interview Questions

- Can you describe your work using entertainment and narratives to promote social change?
 - Do you use the term narrative change or how do you term this work?
 - In what contexts have you invested in this type of work? On what topics?
 - What are the promises of this work?
 - What are some of the challenges?
- Here's our working definition: *"Narrative change is the effort to challenge, modify, or replace existing narratives that perpetuate inequity and uphold an unjust status quo, through the creation and deployment of new or different narratives. In part, [it] is geared toward...shifting the 'underlying values and beliefs' that get activated around a certain issue. It is also...about developing the infrastructure to make those shifts powerful."*
 - Does this encapsulate the work you do or invest in?
 - Can you think of any wins related to this strategy – in your work or generally?
 - What factors do you think made this work successful?
 - Are there certain topics, conditions, and contexts that make this strategy more likely to succeed?
- What are some challenges your organization faces in terms of investing in narrative change?
 - What has been persuasive for colleagues, leadership, or others, in demonstrating the power of investing in narrative change?
- How do you define success in the context of investing in narrative change?
- What types of impact do you expect such investments to have? In what timeframe?
 - Do others in your organization share this expectation?
- What is your approach to measurement and evaluation of narrative change investments?
 - Do you measure success through incremental impact? How?
- In measuring the impact of your organization's narrative change investments, what are the challenges?
- Do you see any gaps between expectations and reality for this work in your organization's projects or in the field in general?
- What are the areas of alignment between funders and practitioners of narrative change? Areas of misalignment?
- Is there something you wish other funders, colleagues, or practitioners understood better about this work?

Interview Protocol for Practitioners

Appendix B: Interview Questions

- Can you describe your work using entertainment and narratives to promote social change?
 - Do you use the term narrative change or how do you term this work?
 - In what contexts have you done this work? On what topics?
 - What are the promises of narrative change, in your opinion?
 - What are the challenges?
- Here's our working definition: *"Narrative change is the effort to challenge, modify, or replace existing narratives that perpetuate inequity and uphold an unjust status quo, through the creation and deployment of new or different narratives. In part, [it] is geared toward...shifting the 'underlying values and beliefs' that get activated around a certain issue. It is also...about developing the infrastructure to make those shifts powerful."*
 - Does this encapsulate the work you do?
 - Can you think of any wins related to this strategy – in your work or generally?
 - What factors do you think made this work successful?
 - Are there certain topics, conditions, and contexts that make this strategy more likely to succeed?
- What are some of the challenges your organization faces in implementing entertainment-based narrative strategies?
- What are some funding-related challenges your organization faces with this strategy?
- How does your organization define success in the context of entertainment-based narrative strategies?
 - What are your benchmarks or indicators of success?
 - How do you measure or account for this success?
 - Are certain types of impact more difficult to measure or report on than others?
- Do you see any gaps between expectations and reality for this work in your organization or in your organization's funders?
- What are the areas of alignment between funders and practitioners of narrative change?
 - Areas of misalignment?
- Is there something you wish funders understood better about this work?

List of Codes and Code Groupings

Appendix C: Interview Analysis Codes

Definitions

- Culture change
- Culture strategy
- Internal vs. external terminology
- Narrative change
- Narrative strategy
- Strategic communications

Wins

- Local narrative change successes
- Promises
- Reactance to narrative change wins
- Wins

Framework

- Alignment
- Broaden thinking about philanthropy
- Framework
- Funder expectations
- Funding
- Getting buy-in
- Measuring impact
- Misalignment
- Need for experimentation
- Need more narrative change expertise
- Practitioner expectations
- Resistance from funders

Challenges

- Challenges
- Echo chambers hinder message saturation
- Hard to show causality
- Lack of control
- Media fragmentation hinders message saturation

Factors

- Connect to mass media
- Connect to social movements
- Context
- Framework
- Infrastructure
- Invest in dissemination
- Invest in relationship building
- Need for audience targeting
- Need funder education around narrative change
- Need rapid response strategy
- Power
- Repetition + message saturation -> narrative immersion
- Time
- Topic
- Trust
- Use multi-pronged strategies

USC Annenberg

School for Communication
and Journalism

Norman Lear Center

Media Impact Project

www.mediaimpactproject.org



@learcenter | @mediametrics



facebook.com/usclearcenter