About the Arkansas People's History Project

The Arkansas People's History Project (APHP) strengthens groundwork for organizing by facilitating collaborative processes that document and produce media about hidden histories of resistance. We aim to create containers for honest, analytical, and imaginative conversations about the past, present, and future; support organizing efforts through validating people's stories and strengthening relationships; and facilitate political education through making critical narratives accessible to wide audiences.

CHECK OUT OUR WORK AND REACH OUT!

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Reflections and Tools for Transformative Storytelling Projects

"Almost anything will grow in rich, nutritious soil, whereas it's hard to get anything to grow if the soil is barren, toxic, and won't hold moisture. The seeds are our projects, our initiatives, our campaigns, our organizations, our institutions that we want to build. The soil is the compost of beliefs, ideas, values, and narratives that create the environment in which we're working. The soil is more important than the seeds." – Ricardo Levins-Morales

THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF STORYTELLING

The stories we tell, individually and collectively, are powerful. They inform our beliefs about ourselves and the world around us and shape the actions we decide to take.

Throughout our work, we often need to remind ourselves of the myriad ways in which stories can shape social movements. The narrative landscape—the soil in which we plant the seeds of our campaigns and projects—is the result of thousands of stories being told all the time in the world around us. They shape ideologies and realities. Here are some of the key roles we think stories can play:

- Stories can concretely challenge dominant narratives.
- Stories can clarify a collective experience of material conditions through the process of listening and telling.
- Stories can break isolation and help people realize they are not alone.
- Stories can open imaginations, show possible solutions, and highlight how other people dealt with an issue.

- Stories can be aggregated to understand and demonstrate the scale of a particular issue.
- Stories can generate collective outrage and activate people who do not experience a particular injustice to stand in solidarity with those that do.
- Sharing a personal story publicly can be an act of taking power and can serve as an entry point into taking action.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER WHEN BUILDING A STORYTELLING PROJECT

Establishing Goals

We suggest articulating and agreeing on shared principles at the beginning of each project. Similarly, a strong set of goals can serve as a tool for reorientation when the project is at key junctures and a guiding light in moments of conflict or confusion. The guiding goals we set out at APHP's inception have been essential to helping us make decisions that are aligned with our principles and larger objectives. Here are those goals:

- *Connect*
  - Build mutual aid and solidarity by bringing people into dialogue and strengthening relationships within a place across generations.
  - Amplify the voices of people on the frontlines in Arkansas, whether they are actively organizing or not.
  - Cross-pollinate history and stories between different communities; share lessons learned, insights, and visions for the future.
- *Educate*
  - Build the capacity of people to access and analyze data (archives, oral histories, statistics) to use to benefit their communities.
  - Develop the skills of people in the rural South to collectively develop strong analysis by studying the past and assessing the present.
  - Foster understanding across Arkansas of the material inequalities that exist today and what formed them.
- *Organize*
  - Validate people's struggles and open space for envisioning transformative futures by inviting people into storytelling.
  - Use deep listening and participatory processes to create media pieces that can be used in current and future organizing.
  - Use lessons learned from local history to inform better organizing strategies.

Critical Planning Questions

We have found it essential to define the intended outcome of each narrative project up front. Storytelling and narrative change projects can be relatively quick or quite lengthy, depending on the purpose and the material. Short projects can be highly responsive to a

specific political moment. Longer term projects often have broader goals that can support a longer vision of liberation, since the specific political mood and conversation can change multiple times during a project's lifetime.

Questions to ask include:
- What stories can help meet the needs of the current political moment?
- Is the project centered around soft contributions (e.g. shifting how certain demographics think about an issue; creating more space in a certain community for imagining a transformed world), hard contributions (e.g. driving a campaign to win a certain concrete outcome), or both? Narrative change can often be harder to measure than material change, but they feed each other.
- Who is the intended audience, and how will they ideally change as a result of engaging with the project?

We suggest using the answers to these overarching questions to inform the project planning. We approach key planning questions in this order:
1. Which specific historical moment, event, or period might be best highlighted to achieve the outcome?
2. What format will make the history most accessible and usable for the intended audience?
3. What format will best serve the telling of this specific history? For example, the story of a specific labor strike might be conducive to a narrative podcast, but the history of labor organizing over several decades is more complex so may need a less linear format like an exhibit.
4. How can the storytelling process and product serve the organizers' and communities' larger needs and goals?

Tips for Building a Team

- Create a clear structure and decision-making flow at the beginning of each project. These systems may need updating along the way to account for the ebb and flow of people's lives and the ways documentation projects often grow and evolve during research and production.
- Be conscious and make strategic use of the unique perspectives of everyone on the project team. Collaboration among people with a wide diversity of experiences and backgrounds can be useful and generative in a number of ways, and it requires that each person is conscious of their blind spots and positionality.
- Build in the time and resources to support people to show up as fully as possible. Our existing system can make it a struggle to do non-survival work, especially in crisis situations. Some people have limited technical or computer skills. Others have short-term memory loss. Others need food, a ride, or a cell phone. Building a project with people on the frontlines often means supporting/problem-solving in a range of ways.

- Pay team members and participants a living wage, recognizing that unless the work is full-time, most people will need to do the project in addition to their other, often full-time, work.
- Plan to move at the pace the people involved need. Even if the project is a person's full-time work, people coming from marginalized communities often have compounding crises outside of work that require significant time and attention.
- Commit to regular and responsive communication with the larger community during production to create work that more closely reflects the realities of the people who lived a history.

MORE PROJECTS AND RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

Narrative Change Research and Analysis
- The Opportunity Agenda's Research Lab
https://opportunityagenda.org/narrative-research-lab/
- The Opportunity Agenda's Messaging Reports
https://opportunityagenda.org/our-tools/messaging-reports/
- The Frameworks Institute Resources Library
https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/library/
- Funding Narrative Change Report
https://narrativeinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Funding-Narrative-Change_v2.pdf
- The Narrative Initiative Resources Library
https://narrativeinitiative.org/resources/

Participatory and Other Power-Building Storytelling Projects
- The Neighborhood Story Project https://www.neighborhoodstoryproject.org/about
- A Living Chance: Storytelling to End Life without Parole
https://www.facebook.com/alivingchance/
- Migrant Roots https://www.migrantrootsmedia.org/
- Voices from Our Public Schools http://publicschoolvoices.com/tagged/mmp
- Queering the Map https://www.queeringthemap.com/
- Extractive vs. Healthy Storytelling
http://www.mediaactionresearch.org/extractive-vs-healthy-storytelling-an-interview-with-jade-begay-of-indigenous-rising-media/
- MPD150 https://www.mpd150.com/
- Mobile Print Power http://www.mobileprintpower.com/
- Storyline: http://www.storyline.media/
- Rich Coast Project: http://www.therichcoastproject.org/whatwedo/
- StoryShift https://www.workingfilms.org/story-shift/about/

Movement History Organizations and Resources

- Zinn Education Project curriculum materials
  https://zinnedproject.org/teaching-materials/
- The Shoeleather History Project https://shoeleatherhistoryproject.com
- Museum Archipelago (podcast) https://www.museumarchipelago.com/
- The Shutdown WTO Organizers History Project
  https://www.shutdownwto20.org/shutdownwto20
- Philadelphia Public History Truck- https://phillyhistorytruck.wordpress.com/
- ON-SCREEN PROTOCOLS & PATHWAYS: A Media Production Guide to Working with
  First Nations, Métis and Inuit Communities, Cultures, Concepts and Stories
  https://drive.google.com/file/d/1fOpHw5grHIAt-yB8PSwYAoL8Qyg0NDbN/view
- "Thinking with Care" in the Archives of the early AIDS Crisis
  https://www.radicalhistoryreview.org/abusablepast/thinking-with-care-in-the-archives-of-the-early-aids-crisis/
- COLLECTIVE WISDOM: Co-Creating Media within Communities, across Disciplines
  and with Algorithms https://wip.mitpress.mit.edu/collectivewisdom

Community/Movement Archives

- Freedom Archives https://freedomarchives.org/
- Interference Archive http://interferencearchive.org/
- South Asian American Digital Archive https://www.saada.org/
- Lesbian Herstory Archives http://www.lesbianherstoryarchives.org/
- Women's Liberation Archives for Action
  https://www.redstockings.org/index.php/alternate-home
- People's Media Record https://peoplesmediarecord.com/