

SHIFTING THE NARRATIVE

RECOMMENDATIONS

Narrative change does not happen on its own, particularly around contested social justice issues. It typically results from a sophisticated combination of collaboration, strategic communications tactics, and cultural engagement, all attuned to key audiences and societal trends. It requires both discipline and investment. The involvement of people whose lives are directly impacted by the narrative change being attempted is critical in the development and deployment of strategy.

The process is a feedback loop because shifting narratives over time requires listening and learning from what is and is not working and incorporating that back into movement goals, more refined research, and narrative evolution. External circumstances change, moreover, requiring recalibration and, sometimes, reformulation. Ignoring those seismic changes risks clinging to a narrative that has become out of date.

Our six-part narrative research study, [Shifting The Narrative](#), also shows—promisingly—that **there are consistent tactics, trends, and revelations** when it comes to successful narrative change efforts. We believe that the recommendations below, which are a product of the report, can provide social justice advocates, policymakers, and media commentators with insight into the **elements of successful narrative shift efforts**, alongside what to consider when undertaking such campaigns.

So, how do we shift the narrative?

1. Design a long-term strategy that is rooted in values.

By clearly communicating what was at stake in the form of core values, many of the actors in these campaigns were able to speak to their audiences' value systems and emotions. Doing so enabled them to organize their messaging around a constant theme over the long term and use that framework to identify the stories and statistics they needed, depending on the circumstances or messaging opportunity.

In the case of the death penalty and racial profiling, the central values were fairness and equal treatment under the law. Instead of filling their messages with only statistics that showed unequal treatment, advocates consistently tied their arguments back to the systemic racial biases that were causing the statistically bad outcomes. That basic threat to values meant that arguing for small changes to systems that inherently perpetrate unequal treatment was less acceptable to core audiences.



2. Know and analyze the counternarrative.

While this may seem obvious—as we are all too familiar with the narratives that work against our strategies—it’s important to take a moment to assess what is really resonating with audiences about the counternarrative.

For instance, in the strategy to “end welfare as we know it” advocates tapped into the stated desire to help those experiencing poverty and fashioned their opposition to anti-poverty programs as concern for their effects on recipients, particularly Black communities. They pointed to purported phenomena like the culture of dependency and the breakdown of the African American family. Doing so allowed them to shift quickly into more racially-charged props such as the welfare queen trope.

3. Identify and dismantle the assumptions the counternarrative relies on.

Anti-death penalty advocates keyed into their opponents’ reliance on what was “working” in the criminal justice system. By focusing on that pragmatism, they were able to flip the script to point out the ways that the death penalty was actually an amplified result of so many things that weren’t working in the system, particularly when it came to racial bias. By throwing into question the assumption that the system was fair, they were able to undermine confidence in execution as a penalty and successfully argue, in many cases, for its abolition. The anti-rape movement began by taking these assumptions head-on and working to dismantle the various “rape myths” that pervaded society. By finding ways to consistently counter these dominant ideas about sexual violence, advocates were able to change the conversation, to some extent, in courtrooms, pop culture and everyday conversations.



4. Establish your own frame and tell an affirmative story.

While counternarratives and external factors beyond the direct control of advocates appear to play a significant role in shaping narratives, these studies also indicate that the advocates best positioned to respond to unpredictable external variables—or the activity of the opposition—all gained ground following the adoption of offensive communications strategies.

In the case of both the anti-death penalty and anti-gun movements, going on the offensive changed the game. Armed with an effective communications strategy, advocates can reset the terms of the debate and make considerable headway in challenging the efficacy of the death penalty and the imagined dominance of the National Rifle Association. While the anti-rape movement began very much in reaction to rampant myths and the resulting harmful policies and behavior, advocates were able to reframe the debate into a narrative of empowerment and justice. While still being against something—sexual violence and harassment—the narrative started to become more about being for equal treatment and accountability.

5. Center the voices of those who are most affected and connect them to systemic solutions.

In the cases of the #MeToo, racial profiling, and anti-gun violence movements, the strategy of spotlighting survivors' stories was a crucial part of developing the narrative. Equally important, from a strategic viewpoint, was linking those stories to systemic solutions to avoid asking audiences only for sympathy for the individuals involved. Instead, advocates were able to present systemic solutions that would require policy-level change. Also strategic is bringing in new, unexpected messengers, as anti-death penalty advocates did when forming alliances with families of murder victims who oppose the death penalty.



6. Broaden the implications of the problem and the benefits of the solution.

While it is important from both a narrative and ethical standpoint to center the voices of the people who are most affected, it is also important to compel audiences to see how these issues affect us all. Living in a society that does not tolerate racial bias in the criminal justice system, sexual violence and harassment, the gun violence epidemic to continue to cost so many lives, the inhumane treatment of animals, or people living in extreme poverty in our wealthy nation is better for us all if we want to consider ourselves a nation of conscience.

7. Make a clear plan, but be ready to be nimble.

One of the clearest takeaways from our analysis has been the significant variation in the tools and tactics adopted between cases, in large part due to the significant role of external/unpredictable factors. For instance, in the case of the death penalty, overarching discourse shifted significantly due to crime rates and scientific developments (specifically, DNA analysis). Advocates adopted and shifted tactics as a result of these external tipping points with varying degrees of success. Animal rights activists had long protested whale captivity, as well as other use of animals in captivity for entertainment purposes. By leveraging *Blackfish*, they were able to take what started as a successful documentary and quickly create an entire campaign. The question remains if they could have taken it further by pushing a larger narrative about captivity that may have then become useful with the somewhat unexpected success of the 2020 series *Tiger King*.

For the full report, including individual case studies, visit [Shifting the Narrative: Six Case Studies](#).

The Opportunity Agenda is a social justice communication lab. We collaborate with leaders to move hearts and minds, driving lasting policy and culture change. We bring the inspirational voices of opportunity and possibility to social justice issues through communication expertise and creative engagement.

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