



NARRATIVE GUIDANCE FOR THE IMMIGRANT JUSTICE MOVEMENT

Narrative Bootcamp 2024 Report

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ABOUT THE BOOTCAMP

The movement for immigrant justice is in the midst of a deep narrative battle. As we fight for a world where everyone is treated with respect and dignity, we are up against forces determined to dehumanize and criminalize our communities.

In the fall of 2024, The Opportunity Agenda's Narrative Research Lab hosted a three-part Narrative Bootcamp series with simultaneous Spanish interpretation. The series provided tools and training to over 400 people across 10 countries, empowering them to shift the narrative on immigrant justice.

The Bootcamp series is part of TOA's soon-to-be launched **Immigrant Narrative Strategy Table**, which will coordinate and mobilize narrative strategies around a 50-year vision for the immigrant justice movement.

LESSONS FOR THE MOVEMENT

One of the project's goals is to provide tools to tell affirmative stories about the need for immigrant justice and develop a shared narrative vision for advocates, communicators, cultural strategists, and movement artists. In these Bootcamp sessions, we invited members of the Immigrant Narrative Strategy Table to share their ideas for the movement and their organizations' approach to narrative change.

In Part 1, we introduced narrative and the distinction between narrative change and strategic communications with **Rinku Sen, Executive Director of Narrative Initiative.**

In Part 2, we explored the importance of audience segmentation and how to utilize audience insights with **Sarah Lowe, Director of Narrative Research and Evaluation at Define American.**

Finally, in Part 3, we shared successful case studies and creative narrative interventions in the field with **Sheridan Aguirre, Culture Change Strategist at United We Dream.**

This series was hosted and produced by **The Opportunity Agenda's Charlie Sherman, Manager of Narrative Strategy** and **Britney Vongdara, Research Coordinator.**

INTRODUCTION TO NARRATIVE

Narratives are big stories rooted in shared values and underlying beliefs that help us understand how the world works. Narratives give context to seemingly independent stories, creating larger meaning that explains why an issue exists in its current form. Narratives can be harmful or supportive. While harmful narratives can hinder movements and prevent transformative change, liberatory narratives have the potential to reshape the public's perception on a certain issue.

Harmful Narrative Example: The Bootstraps Narrative

“Pull yourself up by the bootstraps”: This narrative reiterates the belief that success is determined solely by how hard people work, rooted in the idea that the world is inherently competition-based and an equal playing field. This narrative shows up in our news headlines, our interpersonal conversations, and the current dominant political rhetoric.

Strategic communications refers to the ways that we use communications tactics strategically to achieve our short-term goals. This includes the ways specific messages, messengers, and campaigns are utilized to achieve a specific policy or community win.

This differs from **Narrative Change**, which is the long-term work of changing narratives to better align with the strategic goals of our movements. The shifting of narratives takes place over long periods of time and requires a diverse set of messengers and storytellers to reshape the narrative ecosystem of your issue. **The goal is to normalize values that are key to your movement and uplift underlying beliefs that align audiences with your messaging, culture, and policy campaigns.** Once narratives have been changed, they must be maintained and strengthened so they can endure.

INTRODUCTION TO NARRATIVE

Narrative change is a long-term fight

Narrative change takes a long time; years to decades in many cases. To successfully shift narratives, we need a diverse set of messengers and messages that activate people's deeply held beliefs and values. Narrative change is about normalizing the values that we hold dear and that can advance support for our movements.

Strategic comms and narrative complement each other

Strategic communications are the efforts to use communications to achieve both short- and long-term goals for your movement. Narrative change is focused solely on the long-term narrative arc of an issue – looking to find durable and sustainable shifts in public opinion and dominant narratives. Employing both tactics allows us to address current challenges without losing sight of our long-term vision.

Using culture to your advantage is key

Culture is one of the main ways that we experience and understand narratives. Cultural access points -- such as television, music, video games, etc. -- can often be a more effective way of reaching audiences to shape their thinking and core values, rather than listing facts or discussing policy.

UNDERSTANDING AUDIENCES

Narrative change requires a diverse set of messengers and storytellers to help shape the narrative ecosystem of your issue and activate people's deeply held beliefs and values. **The better you understand your audience and your audience strategy, the easier you can create cultural strategies and messaging that resonates with them.**

Audience Segmentation refers to the segmenting of one's audiences around certain shared characteristics with the goal of using that insight in your communications strategy.

Traditionally, researchers and communicators have relied on demographic data such as party affiliation to segment their audiences. For a variety of reasons, movements for social justice have begun using more nuanced tactics to segment their audiences, some of which include:

- Using a **support scale** to place potential audience members based on how much they believe and support the narrative you are advancing. This helps you energize your base as well as not trigger your opposition.
- Examining people's **values and beliefs** about the world to predict how they might react to certain narratives. Here, you might look at what values are important to people, which identities are most salient, and what motivates them to action.
- Understanding what **media** different audiences consume to help understand what might motivate them to adopt your narrative. This method allows you to think about what **stories, storytellers, and mediums** might be most effective for certain groups.

UNDERSTANDING AUDIENCES

Audience Segmentation in Practice:

Sarah Lowe from [Define American](#) shared research conducted with Harmony Labs to understand [the media habits of audiences that could be persuaded towards a pro-immigrant narrative](#). Looking at the lesser polarized groups in terms of media consumption, Define American explored [what TV shows certain groups with specific values and worldviews watch](#). They also looked at what stories and narratives might resonate best.

Su Patel from the [New York Immigration Coalition \(NYIC\)](#) discussed the launch of their new [Immigrants are New York](#) project, done in collaboration with TOA's Immigrant Justice research. This project aimed to shape a pro-immigrant narrative in New York by uplifting the cultural contributions of immigrant New Yorkers through high-visibility subway and bus ads as well as public art installations. When creating this project, NYIC had to grapple with changing audience dynamics and political climates. This project affirms [the crucial role that culture and narrative change campaigns can play in reaching new and untapped audiences](#) who may not usually see NYIC's advocacy work.

SUCCESSFUL NARRATIVE INTERVENTIONS

Narrative change is a long-term fight. Changing the big story around an issue, topic, or policy takes time.

Organizations and individuals seeking to change narratives are attempting to move power from current problematic narratives to narratives that liberate our communities and uplift our demands.

There are several core elements in engaging in narrative change:

- **Understand the harmful narrative** around the topic you are advocating for, as well as what the **desired narrative** would be that would make wins easier for you/your organization.
- Think deeply about **who you are talking to and what you are saying to them** in your communications efforts. Different audiences hold different beliefs, and we have to be strategic about how we use our communications to bring about the narrative changes we want.
- **Be proactive in using the arts and popular culture** to help promote your desired narrative. People across the US are deeply invested in culture, art, and food, and leveraging this investment can be a helpful way to find new pro-immigrant audiences.

SUCCESSFUL NARRATIVE INTERVENTIONS

Case Studies from United We Dream (UWD):

- **Multi-year campaign:** “No Borders, Just Flavors” is a competitive cooking web show that invites young immigrants to create dishes from their cultural background. The unscripted nature feels authentic to viewers, and the young chefs are able to share their family’s intimate immigration story and parts of their culture.
- **6-month campaign:** UWD collaborated with Native Organizers Alliance to convene a meeting space for Indigenous and immigrant youth to co-create and make art in Tulsa, OK. In these spaces, they visualized what their future could look like and discussed gratitude.
- **1-month campaign:** UWD’s rapid response to Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) in the 5th Circuit Federal Court included bringing artists and folks together virtually to talk about what was happening with DACA. They invited drag queen Isabelle Valenciga to host the discussion and had a live sketch created by Art Twink to illustrate what people were talking about in that space.

SUCCESSFUL NARRATIVE INTERVENTIONS

It's important to have discipline

Not everything will work or work the first time. **Changing narratives and culture requires long term, sustained effort and resilience.** Do this work in collaboration with other movement leaders and organizations to help sustain the movement.

Don't be afraid of artistic experimentation

Try working with different artists and cultural workers to see what resonates with your audiences. Allow artists to lead and trust their artistic vision.

Infuse joy in the narratives

So many of the stories we hear about immigration already center trauma and suffering. As we work to advance the immigrant justice movement, we should uplift the joy we want to see!

CONCLUSION

Now more than ever, it is time for progressives and those we care about to win the narrative fight for immigrant justice. Just as immigration policy has been used to spur hatred and division, immigration narratives centered around equity, care, and justice can heal these divisions and spur opportunities to change our flawed systems.

A future where all of us benefit from diversity, opportunity, and true community safety has to be messaged, advertised, and integrated into all of our work. And as we continue to build power across our movements and spheres of organizing, this future will guide our work.

Remember that narrative change is a long-term fight, and we must work hard and collaboratively to create the future that we want to see through our art, our culture, and our narratives.

In order to strengthen the narrative capacity of the movement, it's important to have the tools and knowledge we need to build collective power.

For a copy of the webinar recordings or to consult about how to best use narrative strategy in your organization's work, please reach out to narrativeresearchlab@opportunityagenda.org.

RESOURCES



NARRATIVE RESEARCH LAB LIBRARY AND WEBINARS

opportunityagenda.org/narrative-research-lab/



DEFINE AMERICAN: MOVE THEM OR LOSE THEM REPORT

defineamerican.com/research/move-them-or-lose-them/



NARRATIVE INITIATIVE RESOURCE LIBRARY

narrativeinitiative.org/resources



NYIC: IMMIGRANTS ARE NY CAMPAIGN

immigrantsareny.org/about



UNITED WE DREAM: NO BORDERS, JUST FLAVORS

unitedwedream.org/nobordersjustflavors/about/



The Opportunity Agenda is a community dedicated to building narrative and cultural power to move our nation toward a vision of justice, equity, and opportunity for all.

We build the public imagination and cultural will to challenge white supremacy and its pervasive impact, work in community to overcome opposition narratives that exclude and divide us, and advance narratives that support opportunity for all.

As part of TOA's Immigrant Justice work, the Narrative Research Lab showcases and advances narrative research within the immigrant justice space.

The Lab is comprised of a digital library and a monthly webinar series which highlights emerging research to shape narratives within the movement. The goal of the Narrative Research Lab is to provide greater access to research and messaging guidance for communicators and advocates working to advance justice for immigrants.

Learn more at opportunityagenda.org/narrative-research-lab

