



Future Over Fear

TOOLS TO BUILD A DIFFERENT STORY

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INTRODUCTION

About The Opportunity Agenda

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 work with advocates, creatives, and communicators to build the public imagination and cultural will to replace harmful narratives of fear with narratives about the future we believe in and deserve.

Leveraging our 20-year legacy in the social justice field, TOA engages in collaborations to build a compelling and effective groundswell for change. We provide expertise, knowledge, resources, and collaborative spaces for strategists, communicators, creators, and allies throughout the social justice sector to create and propagate narratives that support equity, justice, opportunity, inclusion, and belonging.



How We're Meeting This Moment: Future Over Fear

To build a fairer, more inclusive society, we need a clear vision and a strong narrative strategy. At the core is the commitment to a multiracial democracy that champions equity, amplifies diverse voices, and drives collective action. This vision, however, is under attack—through coordinated legal, political, cultural, and narrative attacks on immigrant communities, racial justice, and democracy itself.

All around us, we are seeing **Fear Narratives** that use blame, division, and threat to spark anxiety—often

targeting communities most affected by oppression to justify control and keep existing power structures in place, while deepening narratives rooted in racist and xenophobic worldviews. Fear is one of the strongest emotional motivators out there, so it's no wonder that these narratives dominate our discourse today. They also serve as fuel for misinformation and disinformation, complicating the media landscape even further.

Yet research shows there is another emotional motivator that rivals fear, which is hope. Hope is a transformational motivator that increases our levels of resilience to get things done, even given difficult odds. It is a powerful tool to wield as social justice advocates, building hope around the future we envision. **Future Narratives**—narratives rooted in our vision of a world where equity, justice, opportunity, and inclusion are available to all—galvanize people toward a shared, hopeful future.

This toolkit was created to help shift the conversation from fear to possibility. It provides research-backed messaging, narrative strategies, and real-world examples to support the Future Narratives we need—narratives that move us from division to inclusion, from reaction to solution, from resistance to transformation.





Photo Credit: Caroline Kroon

Using This Toolkit

Future Over Fear: Tools to Build a Different Story was designed deliberately for social justice leaders and people deeply concerned with issues concerning equity, opportunity, and America’s current direction. The toolkit provides research-backed language, tools, and resources to build sustainable Future Narratives on racial justice, multiracial democracy, and immigrant opportunity.

This toolkit was designed to help our movements:

- Strengthen communication strategies by championing our vision, rather than focusing on short-term messaging; shifting the deeper narratives that shape mindsets, **culture**, and systems; and building toward long-term transformation.
- Use cultural and narrative strategies together to shift culture—not as separate practices, but as interconnected forces that can change what people believe is possible and achievable. Narrative change and culture shifts happen through organizing, policy, and creative work alike. We can build and support collaborative networks to share strategies, possibilities, and joy between these distinct spaces.
- Build momentum for a multiracial democracy by giving people the language, tools, and strategies to amplify the values we want to see in the world. Narrative change doesn’t happen overnight, but when we integrate it into all aspects of our work, we create the drumbeat that moves hearts, minds, and policies.

OUR FUTURE NARRATIVES

In this toolkit, we are introducing three new Future Narratives based on recent research into white supremacist narratives and civic engagement motivators, combined with our narrative approach and input from the field. We hope these Future Narratives provide replicable tools for advocates, cultural activists, and social justice communicators across the country.

FUTURE NARRATIVE:

Racial Justice

The United States has always been thought of as the “land of opportunity.” Yet today, as it has been throughout history, institutions and systems deny people access to opportunities based on the color of their skin or ethnic background. At the same time, politicians have increasingly attacked programs that attempt to account for historical bias or inequities, blocking further progress. Learning, working, and living with people from different backgrounds and perspectives benefits us all. Our communities are made stronger when we embrace diversity and the inherent dignity of every individual. We must continue, steadfastly, in the movement toward racial justice and raise our voices to protect the values of opportunity, equity, and belonging. This is a fight for all of us.

FUTURE NARRATIVE:

Multiracial Democracy

Our society is stronger when we have a diverse and representative democracy where we work together to create freedom and opportunity for all. Everyone deserves to have a say in the decisions that affect them. While this vision of democracy is strong, the opposition is strategically limiting our freedoms and suppressing our voices. Participating civically, whether it be at the local or national level, is one of the greatest powers that we have to make our voices heard. Through our voices and actions, we all play a role when it comes to engaging in democracy. Democracy is an everyday job.

FUTURE NARRATIVE:

Immigrant Opportunity

People across the world share a strong desire for freedom, the ability to provide for their families and communities, and the right to live safely. This is why so many people of all backgrounds make courageous sacrifices to start new lives in the United States. People working hard for a dignified life deserve a roadmap to live, thrive, and help build the world we want to live in. We need to build and protect policies that allow people to flourish in this country, including a just and humane immigration system.

Where to Start

This toolkit is designed to meet you where you are.

Each section is practical, digestible, and built to support your goals. You can focus your learning where it matters most—every section stands alone while contributing to the bigger picture.

Here are a few entry points to help guide your way:

If you're just getting started with narrative or cultural strategy

A primer for anyone looking to build a narrative foundation rooted in long-term change.



EXPLORE:

What Is Narrative? (page 8)

Narrative and Culture Go Hand-in-Hand (page 10)

Why Lead With Shared Values? (page 13)

If you're responding to the political moment and need guidance NOW

Go-to guidance for campaigners, cultural organizers, and communicators responding to urgent narrative threats.



EXPLORE:

Our Future Narratives (page 22)—including Racial Justice, Multiracial Democracy, and Immigrant Opportunity

If you're planning a campaign, cultural project, or organizing strategy

Tools to help you design intentional strategies that connect vision, audience, and action.



EXPLORE:

Planning Your Narrative Strategy (page 37)

Audience Segmentation (page 15)

VPSA Messaging Structure (page 18)

If you're integrating cultural strategy into your organization's work

Especially useful for institutions, program teams, and funders treating cultural work as central to movement-building.



EXPLORE:

Narrative and Culture Go Hand-in-Hand (page 10)

Elements of Cultural Strategy (page 38)

If you're an advocate or strategist looking to deepen creative partnerships

Great for communications staff, campaigners, or organizers exploring how to collaborate more effectively with artists and culture makers.



EXPLORE:

When You're Working With Creatives (page 47)

If you're an artist looking to deepen your audience and impact

Whether you're working from within movements or using your art to inspire change, these sections will help you grow your impact with intention.



EXPLORE:

Narrative and Culture Go Hand-in-Hand (page 10)

Elements of Cultural Strategy (page 38)

Audience Segmentation (page 15)

Why Lead With Shared Values? (page 13)



Photo courtesy of TOA

“When we tell stories that hit familiar notes, people connect with them on a deeper level.”

FUTURE OVER FEAR: TOOLS TO BUILD A DIFFERENT STORY

Visioning Our Future Over Fear

What Is Narrative?

Our brains are hard-wired for stories—they shape how we see the world, what we believe, and how we act. Stories come in all shapes and sizes, but many follow the same basic patterns, tapping into universal truths, cultural mindsets, and shared values.

People have used storytelling to share their triumphs, struggles, and hopes since they were painting on cave walls 40,000 years ago.

When we tell stories that hit familiar notes, people connect with them on a deeper level. They resonate and elicit not just understanding, but also emotion and cultural significance. Different versions of the same story travel well-worn pathways in our minds—we fill in the meaning and morality based on the entire canon of stories we've heard before. We don't have to be told to root for the underdog—we know it intuitively. We know what to expect: a beginning, middle, and end and heroes, villains, and lessons learned.

Narratives, meanwhile, transcend these single stories. They don't start and end neatly. They build and shift over

time, binding with the beliefs and assumptions we already hold.

At The Opportunity Agenda, we define narrative as “an overarching story, rooted in shared values and common themes, that influences how people process information and make decisions.” These overarching stories, repeated over time, shape public perception and influence public policy.

You can draw a straight line between the “Love is Love” narrative shift that came out of the marriage equality movement and the resulting 2015 Supreme Court ruling that legalized same-sex marriage in all 50 states.

Narratives help us connect the dots. They help us form patterns between random headlines, cultural conversations, and personal experiences, giving structure and meaning to disconnected events. This pattern-making leads us to take mental shortcuts—snap judgments about what's normal, fair, or possible.

As writer and cultural organizer Jeff Chang explains:

“Stories are like stars—individual, bright, inspiring. Narratives are like constellations, or a collection of stars. Constellations connect stars together, giving them a deeper meaning or pattern. Culture is like a galaxy. It's the home for the constellations and the stars. All these elements are in a constant state of motion and interaction.”

The most powerful narratives aren't just familiar; they're literally everywhere. We hear them in books, TV shows, news stories, and speeches from people in power. Over and over again.

As you can imagine, the power of narrative can be harnessed for good or bad. As our brains scan quickly for patterns and

connections, we sometimes lose the nuance. This is where strategy comes in.

We understand that, even as we're building new, liberatory narratives, people are still being inundated with harmful **messages** about the way the world is and the way it should remain. We have to combat this on two fronts: by chipping away at elements of harmful **Fear Narratives** while proactively championing the new **Future Narratives** we're working to build together.



Photo Credit: Naoco Wowsugi



Photo Credit: Caroline Kroon

Narrative Building Is Long-Term Work

So, how do we use **strategic communications** to promote Future Narratives and disrupt and replace Fear Narratives?

Narrative building takes time and requires long-term vision and investment. But the dynamic interaction between stories, narrative, and **culture** means narratives can sometimes take hold quickly. *Me Too*, for instance, started as a celebrity tweet and rapidly grew into a movement, showcasing the narrative power of social media in shifting public perception of sexual violence.

On Oct. 15, 2017, actress Alyssa Milano tweeted: “If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote ‘*Me too*.’ as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem.” By the next day, the phrase had been tweeted more than 500,000 times. On Facebook, the hashtag was used by more than 4.7 million people in 12 million posts within the first 24 hours.

The *Me Too* movement built itself on the foundational work of decades of activists, advocates, scholars, and everyday people who fought against rape culture, including the important work of Tarana Burke, who first coined “Me too” to raise awareness about the trauma and pervasiveness of sexual violence.

The Harvey Weinstein scandal forced that narrative into the mainstream, allowing us to track how the *Me Too* movement altered public opinion and brought about policy change on the local, state, and federal levels.

Unfortunately, the stories and messages we hear day-to-day are not static but dynamic, constantly evolving to shift the power of narratives that support policy changes impacting our communities. That’s why many of us have seen in our lifetime both moments of incredible progress to expand opportunity and justice, followed by successful efforts to roll back our civil and human rights.

The point is that a steady drumbeat of coordinated storytelling builds bold narratives, under which many disparate stories can nest, creating social, cultural, and political power greater than the sum of its parts.

Uplifting shared values is another critical piece of narrative development. As communicators, we have an opportunity to put these values front and center, normalizing them over time. Thus, we create hopeful visions of a future where living our values is the norm, not the exception.

While stories can highlight individual experiences, narratives are about the collective. By showcasing many stories and diverse voices, we are weaving a vibrant tapestry that strengthens our narratives. Think about the people closest to the problems we’re working to solve. It’s essential that their voices, solutions, and experiences are centered in that tapestry.

Finally, acknowledging our specific audience—and the impact our messaging may have on them—gives us a clearer vantage point for uplifting liberatory narratives. When we pause to consider who we’re trying to reach and how they might receive our message, we gain the insight needed to communicate with care, build trust, and move people toward justice in ways that feel resonant and real.

At The Opportunity Agenda, we break down these different considerations and help you design narrative interventions using our **Narrative Strategy Framework** (see page 40).

Narrative and Culture Go Hand-In-Hand

You cannot shift narrative or change hearts, minds, and policy without considering culture. Culture refers to both a community's specific values, practices, and systems as well as cultural domains from the most popular to the most niche, including sports, theatre, visual art, comedy, social media pet fandoms, and more.

Cultural strategy brings the fields of advocacy and arts & culture into alignment and alliance for social change. A strong cultural strategy activates our narrative strategy and builds momentum for change by helping us think big to effectively meet audiences where they are. The spectrum of creativity from grassroots to Hollywood to “art for art’s sake” has the potential to move hearts and minds, inspire action, and build the public will for lasting change.

As outlined in “**Making Waves: A Guide to Cultural Strategy**,” cultural strategy refers to the intentional implementation of arts and culture into a short- or long-term strategy that activates your narrative vision to influence public consciousness around your issue. This may include campaigns, communications, and audience strategy.

Narrative and cultural strategy must work together for sustainable social change. The cultural domain is where we spend our time—it’s the air that we breathe and the context that makes up our lives. While people outside your echo chambers may miss your messaging and advocacy, no one is immune to culture. So we cannot overstate its importance in long-term movement building.

At TOA, we believe that arts and culture have a visionary and transformative power to humanize and normalize ideas in the mainstream. Many of the artists and creatives we encounter are already grappling with social justice issues through their practice, which presents opportunities for collaboration and connection.

Designing a **narrative strategy** involves understanding existing attitudes and beliefs and doing the research to identify values-aligned messengers and collaborators—including artists and creatives—your audience knows and trusts. Combined with reliable data from issue experts, narrative and culture can work together to distill and grow shared, lasting narratives from values and beliefs.

What does this look like in practice? Just as culture refers to ideas, beliefs, and practices, as well as the creative vessels for these ideas, cultural strategy encompasses method and infrastructure. When we talk about cultural strategies at TOA, we’re talking about interventions that thoughtfully integrate art and/or popular culture to move our stories and narratives forward and building the infrastructure that can support this type of ongoing work.



Putting It All Into Practice

This toolkit offers strategies, frameworks, and tools to support your narrative and cultural work—but it’s not a prescription. Its strength lies in how it’s adapted. Whether you’re advancing campaigns, leading cultural strategy, or organizing within movements, the values, direction, and vision you bring will shape your approach. You determine the narrative goals, audiences, and interventions that make sense for your context. We offer the structure, and you bring the insight and strategy to challenge injustice and support systemic change.



“We focus on shared values—principles that many of us hold across different communities, even when we differ in politics, culture, or experience.”

Photo Credit: Carolina Kroon

FUTURE OVER FEAR: TOOLS TO BUILD A DIFFERENT STORY

Leading With Values



Photo Credit: Shot by Somali

So, What Are Values, Anyway?

Values are the core beliefs that guide our thinking, shape our behavior, and reflect the world we want to live in. They represent the conditions we want to protect and the future we're working to build. In narrative strategy, values act as a moral and emotional compass—giving meaning to the stories we tell and serving as connective tissue across movements, issues, and audiences.

At The Opportunity Agenda, we focus on **shared values**—principles that many of us hold across different communities, even when we differ in politics, culture, or experience. These are the values we're fighting to protect and bring to life. They help bridge divides and build narrative power that reaches across audiences.

Sometimes, though, these values mean different things to different audiences. It's always important to define our values; to be clear about what we actually mean when we say them; and, in some cases, to reclaim them from our opposition.

EXAMPLE: “Security”

We want our audiences to think about “security” as the capacity to have the tools to meet their and their families’ basic needs, not the “security” that conjures images of militarization, policing, and hoarding wealth and resources. While this may be using the same word, given the context, the meaning can be significantly different.

Leading with shared values helps us speak to what matters most. When we ground our messages in values, we're more likely to reach the people we're working to engage.

HERE ARE THE **CORE VALUES** THAT GUIDE OUR WORK:

Opportunity

Everyone should have access to what it takes to reach their full potential, not only to provide for themselves and their families, but also to thrive.

Voice

A healthy society depends on the ability of all to participate and for all to be heard and have ownership in the public square.

Community

We are stronger when we nurture connections with one another and the environment. Further, we are committed to incorporating an antiracist lens into our daily practice.

Equity

All people are created with equal rights, inherent dignity, and the potential for creativity and growth. Dedication to equity is essential for working toward a more just and antiracist society.

Safety

Everyone has the right to exist safely in their community, their workplace, and their homes. We strive to foster an environment in which people are treated the way they wish to be.

Why Lead With Shared Values?

Research shows that starting with shared values is one of the most effective ways to open dialogue. When we lead with issues or policies, people often bring strong opinions, assumptions, or resistance—shaped by dominant narratives and misinformation—which can close the conversation before it even begins.

But when we lead with shared values, we can establish common ground. We invite people into a conversation based on what we all want to protect or make real. From there, we can build toward the policies, systems, solutions, and cultural shifts that reflect and reinforce those values.

Different starting points shape how your message is received. Here's what happens depending on where you begin:

START WITH	PURPOSE	THE RESULTS
Policies	> Names a specific law, rule, or program meant to fix a problem.	> Many people may have already drawn a line in the sand on certain policies, closing the door to deeper conversation. Others may tune out or feel powerless when policy feels too technical or disconnected from their lived experience.
Issues	> Describes a problem or pattern that affects people or communities.	> Issues can feel abstract, politicized, or overwhelming. Even when we show how they affect us all, people may tune out if the connection to their lives isn't clear. With growing issue fatigue, many disengage, thinking, "What can I really do about it?"
Values	> Connects to what people care about, hope for, and want to protect.	> Sharing values opens the door through connection, shared purpose, and emotional resonance and helps people stay in the conversation by grounding it in what we all want to protect and work toward together.

Leading with values doesn't replace facts—it creates the trust and connection needed for facts to land.

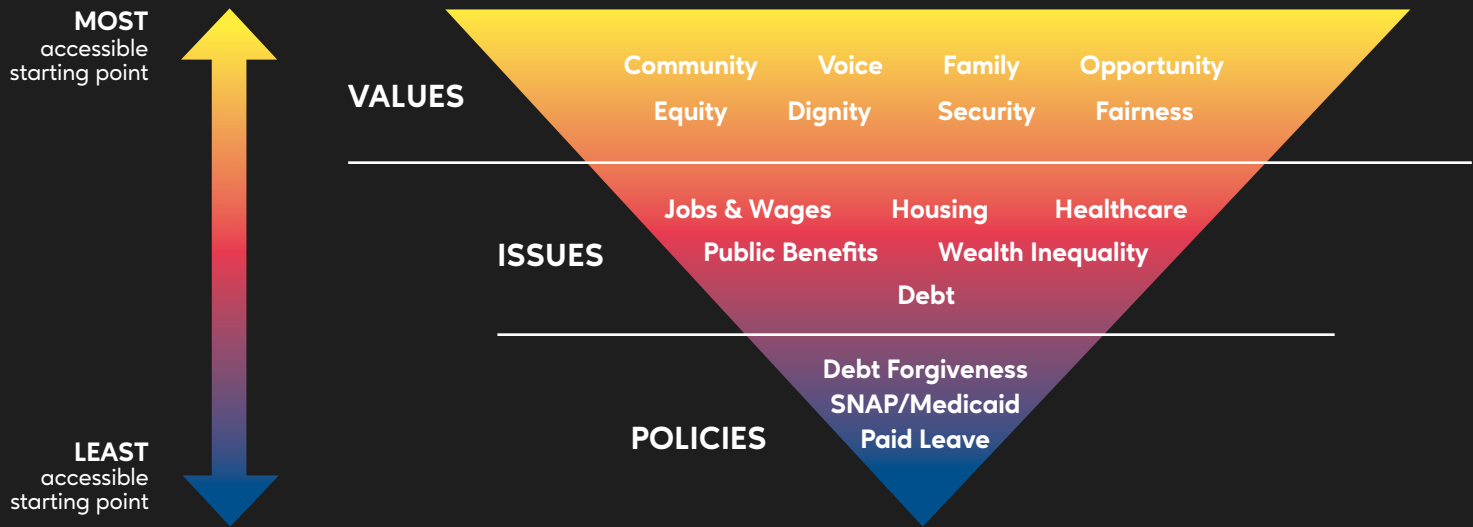
EXAMPLE: Income Inequality & Public Assistance

Let's say you want to build support for a public assistance program. If you start by naming the policy or citing statistics, such as eligibility requirements or budget figures, some audiences may check out or push back before you even finish your sentence. That's because terms like "welfare," "government aid," and "public benefits" often trigger deeply rooted biases and misinformation. People might picture harmful stereotypes about laziness, dependency, or fraud—ideas reinforced by decades of racialized media narratives and political rhetoric.



Why Lead With Values?

Research shows us that values are one of the most powerful access points to conversations with folks, whereas starting with issues or policies can be met with resistance.



But if you begin your message by centering values like **dignity**, **economic opportunity**, and **security**, you open a different door. You might start by saying:

“*In a country as wealthy as ours, everyone should be able to care for their families and live with dignity—even when hard times hit.*”

That framing connects emotionally before diving into details. It invites people to see the issue through the lens of shared humanity and fairness, not through political talking points or distorted assumptions. From that place, your message is more likely to land—and move someone closer to your vision.



TOA PRO TIP:

Make values visible with murals or story-based art.

Words matter, but visuals carry power too. People often absorb meaning from images faster than words. What we show—who’s in the picture, what’s happening, what values are visible—shapes how a message is felt and remembered. In our [We Can Thrive Together toolkit](#), we partnered with artist Rommy Torrico to create a visual that lifts up community, collaboration, and care for the land. The artwork speaks volumes without a single word, making our values vivid and undeniable.

Narrative doesn’t only live in language—it comes to life through culture, the art we make, the visuals we share, and the stories we tell together.



Audience Strategy:

Because the General Public Isn't a Thing

When you understand your audience, you can design messaging that truly connects. But that means moving beyond vague ideas like “the general public.” Trying to speak to everyone often means your message won't land with anyone, and it can even backfire by reinforcing dominant **Fear Narratives**.

Broad messaging might feel safer, but it rarely moves people. Identifying specific audiences allows us to speak to real values, lived experiences, and emotional drivers. It brings precision to our communications and cultural strategies, helping us move people from passive agreement to inspired action.

That takes intention, strategy, and a deep understanding of the people you're trying to reach—not just where they live or how they vote, but what they care about, what stories they already believe, and what possibilities they're ready to imagine.

By grounding your strategy in nuanced audience insight, you gain the power to craft messages and cultural interventions that resonate, motivate, and build toward the future we're all working to realize.

Audience Segmentation:

Finding Your Target Audience

Every issue lives in a landscape of opinions, beliefs, and emotions. People fall across a wide spectrum in how closely they align with your—or your opposition's—vision. But that alignment isn't fixed; people's mindsets can and do shift. Your messaging strategy should meet people where they are and move them toward your narrative goals.

Traditionally, organizations have segmented audiences by broad categories like political affiliation. But that approach often overlooks the complexity of real people. Audiences are shaped by intersecting cultural, political, social, and economic factors—and many hold multiple, even contradictory, beliefs at once. No group is a monolith. That's why narrative change calls for a more nuanced strategy, one grounded in what truly motivates and inspires specific people.

When this toolkit refers to audiences, we're not pointing to fixed groups. Who counts as base, persuadable, or opposition depends entirely on your context—your narrative vision, your campaign goals, and your assessment of who can be moved. We provide the tools, but identifying your target audience is up to you.



REMEMBER:

This toolkit doesn't define your audience for you. Instead, it offers adaptable tools to help you identify and reach the people who matter most to your issue and goals. Your target audience depends on the specific change you're working toward—and who holds influence in making that change real.



TOA PRO TIP:

Every message should be tailored to the needs of a specific audience. One narrative can reach multiple groups with customized messages. Adjust the language, tone, and cultural references while keeping the core themes consistent.

Audience segmentation means understanding who you're trying to reach, what change you want to inspire, and how receptive they are.

The Opportunity Agenda maps audiences from 1 (strongly aligned) to 5 (strongly opposed) to help tailor messaging strategies.

This isn't just labeling—it's a guide for action. By knowing where people stand, you can better choose themes, messages, and trusted messengers to mobilize allies, persuade the moveable middle, and neutralize the opposition.

Here's a breakdown of the 1-to-5 scale we use for audience segmentation

1 Base

These are your people. They already share your values and are excited about your vision. They don't need persuading—they need support, tools, and opportunities to help amplify the work. Center their voices.

Mobilize and energize them.

2 Base-Leaning Persuadables

These folks need reinforcement. Show them how your narrative aligns with their values and give them language and framing they can repeat with confidence.

Let them help carry the narrative.

3 Persuadables

These are the “moveable middle.” When you lead with shared values and offer concrete solutions, you can move them closer to alignment. Help them overcome compassion fatigue by focusing on what's possible—not just what's broken.

Invite them into a story they believe in and can take part in.

4 Opposition-Leaning Persuadables

These people lean away from your narrative but aren't fully closed off. They may share some of your values and can be reached—especially through trusted messengers or strategic entry points.

Themes, metaphors, and influencers can help move them closer to being allies.

5 Opposition

This group actively resists your vision—and they're trying to spread their opposing narrative. The goal is not to win them over, but to neutralize their influence on everyone else. Remember: this group is completely immovable; if there is hope to persuade them, they're not a 5. This is important because we can actively undermine our strategy and exhaust our resources trying to reach people whose minds can never be changed.

Know their tactics so you can inoculate the rest.

Know 'Em to Move 'Em: Understanding Your Target Audience

Once you know where different audiences fall on the scale, it's time to identify your **target audience**—the people you're aiming to reach and move. Sometimes you're choosing your target audience based on your goals and strategies. Other times, you're tailoring your strategy to a specific audience based on opportunity.

For example, if you've been asked to speak at an event, you should spend some time understanding who will be in attendance so you can tailor your message to them. On the other hand, if you're launching a social media campaign, you have an opportunity to choose who you want to target based on the message you want to share. Think about who has the most potential to help shift a narrative, who are you trying to activate through your work, and who will take your message and amplify it within their own networks.



Photo Credit: Clay Banks

Once you've identified your target audience, it's time to dig deeper. This is where strategy meets curiosity. Think like a researcher, organizer, or storyteller. Your job is to understand not just who they are, but what makes them tick.



ASK YOURSELF:

- > Where do they spend time online and in real life?
- > What media are they consuming?
- > Who do they listen to—community leaders, cultural figures, faith leaders, digital influencers, etc.?
- > What inspires them—stories, histories, traditions, movements, ideologies, etc.?
- > What do they currently think about your issue?
- > What do you want them to do?

Every campaign or cultural intervention requires its own audience research.

You know your field best—use these tools to explore, test, and refine who your message is really for. For example, if you're trying to influence a policymaker, your actual audience might be the constituents they listen to.

These insights give you the building blocks to refine your communications and cultural strategies to activate your

audience with clarity, intention, and impact. The more clearly you know who your target audiences are, what they care about, and where they're coming from, the more powerfully you can craft messages and cultural strategies that resonate. Remember: you're not just trying to reach people—you're trying to move them.

VPSA Messaging Structure

At The Opportunity Agenda, we have developed a **messaging structure**, backed by decades of communications and messaging research, that takes audiences on a journey from **V**alue to **P**roblem to **S**olution to **A**ction in a way that really lands. Using this structure, you can develop messages that cut through the noise and help audiences understand their own place in the solutions you're proposing.

VPSA is a flexible framework that you can adapt across formats—whether you're writing an op-ed, scripting a campaign video, planning a press interview, or shaping a message for social media. It can even guide the creative choices behind an art piece, helping you express the values at stake, highlight what's being challenged, point to a vision for the future, and invite your audience to imagine or act differently.

No matter the medium, VPSA helps you build messages that are grounded in values, clear about the problem, focused on real solutions, and designed to move people to action.

It's important to think about how you balance these elements to craft the most persuadable VPSA message. Starting with values as an entry point to the rest of your message is imperative to prime audiences to listen and engage with what you're saying. We recommend spending the most time on solutions—it communicates your expertise and ensures audiences don't fall into apathy from being bombarded with more problems they can't solve. Leading with values and being solutions-focused are probably the two most important takeaways when you start implementing VPSA into your communications work.

On the next page let's look at each element of the VPSA structure individually, with the understanding that, in a complete and effective message, each of these elements works together to establish common ground and shared purpose with your audience, frame the problems we face, point your audience toward systemic solutions, and offer them a way to participate in solving the problem.

Connect to Your Solution With an Affirmative Story



Avoid myth-busting as it can reinforce the opposition's rhetoric.



An affirmative position centered around shared values is more powerful.

Art by Rommy Tarrico



TOA PRO TIP:

Restating a myth in an attempt to debunk it can create a stronger connection in audiences' minds between the topic and the myth. Myth-busting can backfire by repeating harmful frames. In the example on the left, folks mean well—but "Being poor is not a crime" steps into the opposition's narrative. The image on the right focuses instead on an aspirational vision: what it looks like when communities have what they need to thrive and collectively reach abundance. Affirmative messages keep you in control of the story.

Learn more in the Messaging Principles section on page 21.

Value

15%
of your message



Leading with values draws your audience into your message—it immediately makes clear why your audience should care. With so many pressing issues and injustices in the world, it's important to overcome compassion fatigue. By highlighting the important shared values under threat, you compel your audience to care and feel personally connected to the problem you're talking about.

Problem

30%
of your message



Describing the problems we face is where many communicators get stuck. Describe how the problem violates the shared values you've established with your audience. When those shared values are under attack, so is our shared future.

Bring in facts and research findings, but be judicious. Facts do not tend to change people's minds unless they are couched in values. You want the facts and figures you select to connect directly to the solutions you propose. Be careful not to myth-bust—offer an affirmative vision centered on shared values. How you frame the problem influences how your audience wants to solve it. Frame problems in a systemic way to prevent individualized solutions.

Solution

40%
of your message



Pivot quickly to solutions. Positive, accessible solutions leave people with ideas, choices, and motivation. Assign responsibility to the specific decision-makers and/or people who have the power to implement the solutions you propose. Make sure you're connecting the dots for your audience—does your solution directly address the problem in the way you've described it?

Action

15%
of your message



Assign an action to your audience—how can they be part of the solution? This is also Organizing 101—if you give people a way to be involved, they're more likely to see themselves as part of your movement, increasing the chance that they'll continue to take action in the future.

VPSA is not a rigid formula. The power of VPSA is its flexibility. You can shift the order, simplify it, or adapt it depending on your audience, platform, or purpose.

For example, if you're talking to folks who already share your values, you might lead with the solution to inspire them, then name the problem, and wrap with a clear action:



We can make sure everyone in our community has a safe, affordable place to live. But too many of our neighbors are being pushed out by rising rents and housing policies that prioritize profit over people. Because everyone deserves a stable home, we're calling on city leaders to pass rent protections now.

That version starts with solution + value, then moves into the problem, and ends with the action. Sometimes—especially in shorter formats like visuals or social posts—you might use a VSA approach and leave the problem implied. The point is: tailor it to what works best for your people and your platform.

Storytelling Principles to Design Compelling Messages

Effective storytelling is integral to move the hearts and minds of our audiences and motivate them to take action. When crafting messages, there are a few storytelling and messaging principles we can incorporate to really make our messages stick.

1. Ensure Your Message Is Aligned With Tomorrow's Vision

What you say today shapes how we think about our issues in the long run. When designing a message, be mindful that it doesn't just focus on short-term wins, but that it contributes to the larger narrative you're trying to normalize. Frame your problems and solutions in a way that will support your issue 20 years from now, not just today.

2. Tell a Systemic Story

Ensure that you're always framing individual stories within systemic problems and solutions. Sharing individuals' personal stories can play an important role in our strategy, but only when it points to the bigger picture.

Without framing individual experiences with systemic context, you may inadvertently lead audiences to think it's all about personal responsibility. To lead to systemic solutions, we need to tell a systemic story because how you frame the problem will influence how your audience wants to address it.

3. Use Metaphors to Amplify Your Values

Choosing the right metaphor—in language and imagery—can shift how people think and feel about a problem, and what they believe should be done about it, often without them even realizing it.

For instance, when metaphors for crime were tested:

- Describing it as a “beast” led audiences to call for cages, whereas
- Describing it as a “virus” led audiences to ask about root causes and cures.¹

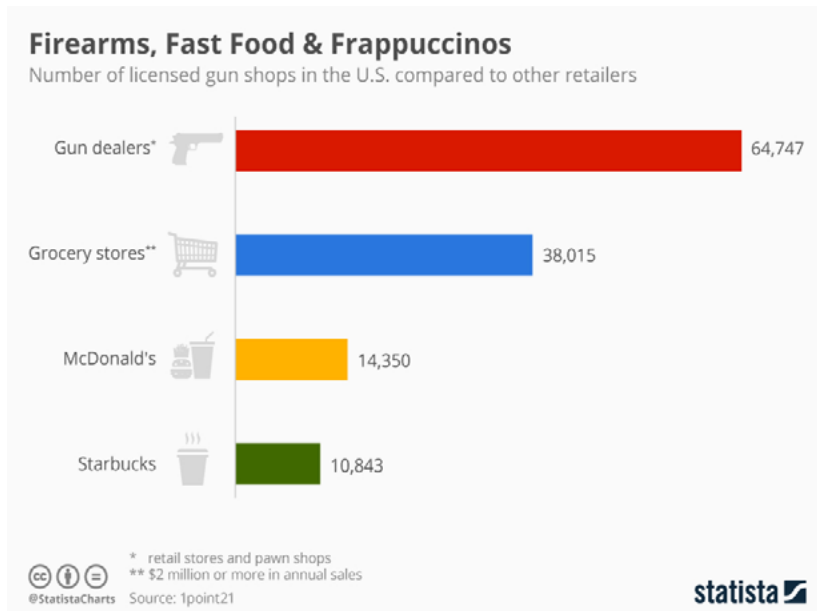
Take your time when choosing imagery to ensure that it reflects your values and leads your audience toward the solutions you'd like to see in the world. And remember, cultural context means that not all metaphors land the same way for every audience!

In this section, we'll share five research-based principles that you can use to incorporate into your VPSAs and strengthen your messages to land with your target audiences.

¹ Metaphors We Think With: <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0016782>

4. Use Social Math to Make Your Numbers More Accessible

Huge data sets and statistics can get lost in translation for many audiences, even when they're a critical part of our argument. To tell a story with your data, try using social math—the practice of translating large statistics or pieces of data by placing them in a social context that provides meaning and makes the information more impactful.



TOA PRO TIP:

Use social math to make complex information more relatable.

More gun dealers than Starbucks in the U.S.

This kind of comparison helps people visualize the scale of a problem by linking it to something familiar—making your message clearer and more memorable.

5. Tell Your Affirmative Story Rather Than Myth-busting

The best way to counter false information is to tell our affirmative story in ways that overcome the other side's falsehoods. By contrast, we should avoid myth-busting, or restating the false argument and then explaining why it's wrong.

Research and experience show that this only results in deepening the myth in our audiences' minds. The repetition of misinformation can cause us to better remember it, but we won't necessarily remember that it was wrong information. This is particularly true when information is stated in the affirmative, as happens with the "Myth/Fact" format of disputing untruths.

FOR EXAMPLE:

Myth: The flu vaccine can sometimes cause the flu.

Fact: The flu vaccine does not cause the flu.

The better approach is to proactively put forward what is true: **"The flu vaccine prevents the flu."**

To tell a story with your data, try using social math.

Photo Credit: Carolina Kroon



“Tools for advocates, cultural activists, and social justice communicators across the country.”

Photo Credit: Molly Adam via Flickr

FUTURE OVER FEAR: TOOLS TO BUILD A DIFFERENT STORY

Future Over Fear

In this section, we introduce three new **Future Narratives** based on a wealth of research into white supremacist narratives, democratic participation, and civic engagement, combined with our narrative approach and input from the field. We hope these Future Narratives provide replicable tools for advocates, cultural activists, and social justice communicators across the country.

Grounding Our Strategy: What the Research Tells Us

We recognize that fear-based narratives dominate today, promoted by a well-resourced narrative change campaign from our opposition. Yet we can overcome this by focusing on affirmative, values-based narratives that prioritize our future—a truly multiracial democracy where all people belong. This is the overarching story we want to take hold as our vision for the future. We hope these Future Narrative examples provide replicable tools for advocates, cultural activists, and social justice communicators across the country.

To achieve **equity** and justice, we must champion a future vision of a multiracial democracy where everyone has equitable access to what they need. This requires dismantling and replacing narratives of white supremacy that foster division and inequality and—in its most extremist forms—hatred and violence. To overcome these **Fear Narratives**, we have researched and designed narrative messaging strategies guided by our visionary hopes for the future.

A Quick Reminder Before You Dive In

What follows reflects narrative directions we've prioritized based on years of research, testing, and collaboration. But this isn't a one-size-fits-all roadmap. The language, examples, and frameworks offered here are meant to support your thinking—not to replace your insight. You bring the essential context: the communities you're accountable to, the goals driving your work, and the strategies that will reach and move your audiences. Adopt what's useful, tweak what needs adapting, and carry forward what strengthens your efforts.

We have used these guiding themes, combined with our narrative approach and input from the field, to develop the following Future Narratives—focused on Racial Justice, Multiracial Democracy, and Immigrant Opportunity—along with applicable messaging guidance, case study examples, and tips on how to implement these narratives into your campaigns.



FUTURE NARRATIVE 1:

Racial Justice

Fear Narrative

The fear narrative around Racial Justice is based on the belief and perceived feelings that promoting a “woke” social and political agenda rooted in racial justice, particularly Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)’, is meant to stifle excellence and opportunities, particularly of white people. This narrative hinges on a mythical America of the past, where meritocracy ruled and hard work was the ticket to success. The fear narrative claims the world has been co-opted by “anti-white” policies that give unfair access and opportunities to communities of color. This belief is rooted in scarcity-model thinking—those who have traditionally held social power fear they’re now losing it, which is a very motivating emotional driver.

Fear Narrative Values

- Merit

America rewards hard work. Everyone should be expected to put in the effort to earn their place, regardless of their background or race. Special treatment undermines the value of earning success.
- Personal Responsibility

In this country, you make your own path in life. People should be accountable for their choices, not blame the system or history for where they are today.
- Opportunity

America is a land of opportunity, where anyone can succeed if they make the right choices and work hard. When some groups are prioritized or given advantages, it threatens that promise of equal opportunity for all.

*These Future Over Fear narratives and recommendations reflect TOA research conducted and reviewed up until June 2025. We recognize that messaging recommendations within the narrative field may have changed beyond this date, based on newly developed research and the climate.

Future Narrative

The United States has always been thought of as the “land of opportunity.” Yet today, as it has been throughout history, institutions and systems deny people access to opportunities based on the color of their skin or ethnic background. At the same time, politicians have increasingly attacked programs that attempt to account for historical bias or inequities, blocking further progress. Learning, working, and living with people from different backgrounds and perspectives benefit us all. Our communities are made stronger when we embrace diversity and the inherent dignity of every individual. We must continue, steadfastly, in the movement toward racial justice and raise our voices to protect the values of opportunity, equity, and belonging. This is a fight for all of us.

Future Narrative Values

- Opportunity

Access to opportunity and the ability to thrive has been shaped by power structures that have deeply racist pasts and presents. Our systems need to account for how opportunity is shaped by these historical and current realities.
- Equity

Our civic fabric is deeper, our country is strengthened, and our culture flourishes when we prioritize equity.
- Diversity

Our communities are made stronger when we embrace diversity and the inherent dignity of every individual.
- Belonging

Racial Justice is essential work when it comes to developing a true sense of shared belonging and purpose across racial and ethnic groups in the United States.

FEAR NARRATIVE

Underlying Beliefs

Narratives are shaped and upheld by our **underlying beliefs**. These are beliefs that are both conscious and subconscious and shape how we understand the world around us.

- It's not about skin color. This belief acknowledges that racism is despicable, but the anti-DEI efforts are not fundamentally racist; rather, they're about fairness. Rewarding hard work is not racist.
- Proud to be American. This centers on the message that "it needs to be okay to be American again, where embracing Christianity, family values, and freedom of speech isn't labeled as racist." This belief is rooted in the deeply emotional motivator of nostalgia, remembering the past as "better times" than the present.
- They're the Real Racists. The hypocritical "woke" obsession with race and social justice dogma is the real source of racism in this country. This is also commonly called "reverse racism."

Mainstream Manifestations

Mainstream Manifestations are real-world examples that either display how the narratives we want to promote are already taking hold within our movements, or how common underlying beliefs can reinforce extreme ideas and conspiracy theories that harm our communities.

Rollback of Affirmative Action

In June 2023, the Supreme Court struck down race-based affirmative action in college admissions, ending decades of legal precedent allowing colleges to consider race in the admissions process.

Executive Orders Against DEI

In January and February 2025, President Trump issued a series of executive orders targeting DEI initiatives in the federal government, aiming to eliminate DEI programs and policies.

FUTURE NARRATIVE

Underlying Beliefs

- **Institutionalized inequality.** We need to get serious about taking on the racist systems that dominate our society and maintain hierarchies of power while exploiting communities of color.
- **Call it what it is.** Only if we work together to call out racism where we see it can we begin to build a more inclusive society from the ground up. By holding society accountable, we can move toward a more inclusive and equitable country together.
- **Expanding opportunity.** It is in everyone's interest to see that talented students from all backgrounds get a fair shot and have the chance to overcome obstacles to educational opportunity.

Mainstream Manifestations

Black Lives Matter Protests

BLM protests and the Movement for Black Lives ignited in 2020, following George Floyd's murder.

Consumer Boycotts

In the spring of 2025, consumers held Target and Dollar General accountable for rolling back their DEI policies.

15 Percent Pledge

More than 35 corporate businesses committed to dedicating 15% of their shelf space to Black-owned brands.



Photo Credit: Shot by Somi

FUTURE NARRATIVE 1: RACIAL JUSTICE

VPSA BREAKDOWN

Value Statement:



Learning, working, and living with people from different backgrounds and perspectives benefit us all. Our communities are made stronger when we embrace diversity and the inherent dignity of every individual.

Name the Problem:



Yet historically and to this day, people are denied access to opportunities based on the color of their skin or their ethnic background. Recently, we've seen increased attacks on DEI programs that try to account for historical bias or inequities.

Guidance Toward Solution:



Only if we work together to call out racism where we see it can we begin to build a more inclusive society from the ground up. By holding society accountable, we can move toward a more inclusive and equitable country together.

Collective Action:



We must continue, steadfastly, in the movement for racial justice and raise our voices to protect the values of opportunity, equity, and belonging. This is a fight for all of us.



A group of attendees and performers pose outside of Soakie's and its sign. (photograph by Gary Carrington, ca. 1994-2004. Licensed for use as part of Gary Carrington Collection of {B/qKC}).



SETTING THE STAGE (KANSAS CITY/COMMUNITY)

Image Credit: {B/qKC}



Through studying narrative research with TOA, I've been able to pinpoint what exactly it is that I want to dismantle—as a narrative idea—and how, specifically, I can do that in practice.

– NASIR ANTHONY MONTALVO, {B/qKC}

NARRATIVE INTERVENTION CASE STUDY {B/qKC} Black Queer Community Archive

{B/qKC}

What They Did:

The Opportunity Agenda's 2024-25 Culture and Narrative Fellow, Nasir Anthony Montalvo (they/them), is an award-winning transdisciplinary journalist and memory worker based in Kansas City, MO. As part of their Fellowship, Nasir developed a narrative intervention strategy for their ongoing project, [{B/qKC}](#), rooted in the practice of archiving.

{B/qKC} is a Black queer community archive based in Kansas City that challenges outdated archival practices through accessible storytelling—all within the frame and study of midwestern Black queer history. {B/qKC} has used traveling exhibitions, public art installations, dance parties, and investigative journalism to promote its research and mission.

Nasir's narrative project stems from researching Kansas City's only Black queer club, [Soakie's](#), which closed in 2004. Before being shut down by a government-sponsored gentrification project, Soakie's was a booming Black gay nightclub from 1993 to 2004. The bar served as a dazzling display of Kansas City's rich ballroom culture, Black queer camaraderie, and chosen family.

"There hasn't been a new Black queer space for us to convene, and the elders don't have a place either. Soakie's shutting down has affected the culture and community of Kansas City," Nasir said, adding that this was their motivation for launching {B/qKC}.

Why It Matters:

Nasir explains why archival practices are so important to the movement for racial justice: "When our world's historical record is constructed by a small group of people—and uncritically fed to us through standardized education, broadcast media, religion and more—we lose so many aspects of ourselves and our cultures. Through the archive, from a family recipe book to the Internet Archive, we preserve a fuller, more resilient record of our history."

As a next step in their project, Nasir has established a workshop series that "takes a hyper-local focus on Kansas City's history of gentrification." The aim is to help fellow activists learn more about community-based archiving.

Nasir will also be launching a searchable database for {B/qKC} at the end of 2025 so that audiences can easily access Black queer Kansas City artifacts. Through this database, Nasir hopes to create a place where the stories and experiences of the Black queer community can be digitally protected, celebrated, and cherished for years to come.



FUTURE NARRATIVE 2:

Multiracial Democracy

Fear Narrative

The fear narrative surrounding American democracy is driven by the belief that traditional power structures—especially those that have long favored white men—are being dismantled. Those who subscribe to this narrative see themselves as defending the American Dream, their individual freedoms, and the limited power they feel they still have. It frames woke progressives as a direct threat to the “real” America—portraying efforts toward inclusion, equity, and justice as dangerous attempts to erase the country’s values and way of life.

Fear Narrative Values

Freedom

Democracy is about protecting the freedoms and individual liberties of “true Americans,” which is often used as a proxy for white Americans, particularly white cisgendered men.

Justice

Our departments of justice are responsible for maintaining “the American way of life” through rules, law, and order.

Ownership

Certain groups of people deserve democracy and the liberties and freedoms it provides, whereas others do not. This is often called “in-group bonding” and is a form of othering.

“We all play a role when it comes to engaging in democracy—using our voices and actions. Democracy is an everyday job.”

Future Narrative

Our society is stronger when we have a diverse and representative democracy where we work together to create freedom and opportunity for all. Everyone deserves to have a say in the decisions that affect them. While this vision of democracy is strong, the opposition is strategically limiting our freedoms and suppressing our voices. Participating civically, whether it be at the local or national level, is one of the greatest powers that we have to make our voices heard. We all play a role when it comes to engaging in democracy—using our voices and actions. Democracy is an everyday job.

Future Narrative Values

Freedom

Everyone deserves the freedom to be their true selves and make their own choices. When we set limitations on people’s rights to engage in the democratic process, we diminish our collective freedom.

Inter-dependence

We understand that opportunity is not only about personal success but also about our success as a collective.

Voice

We should all have a say in the decisions that affect us. Our voices must be heard in voting booths, at public forums, and across all media.

It’s important to remember that everyone has a set of values—even the people we disagree with. While we may sometimes claim the same values as our opposition, the way we define those values can differ significantly.

FEAR NARRATIVE

Underlying Beliefs

Narratives are shaped and upheld by our underlying beliefs. These are beliefs that are both conscious and subconscious and shape how we understand the world around us.

- Democracy is relevant for certain groups of people, but not all. For example, “Make America Great Again” suggests bringing America back to a time when many, specifically people of color, women, and immigrants, were excluded from inherent liberties and civic benefits.
- Democratic ideals are subjective and meant to uphold the status quo, rather than enable change.

Mainstream Manifestations

Mainstream Manifestations are real-world examples that either display how the narratives we want to promote are already taking hold within our movements, or how common underlying beliefs can reinforce extreme ideas and conspiracy theories that harm our communities.

January 6th Insurrection

The January 6, 2020 storming of the Capitol demonstrated an alarming sense of ownership and disregard for the democratic process, in addition to horrifying political violence.

Widespread Voter Suppression

This is a decades-long practice used to exclude people of color from the democratic process. It's a tool rooted in systemic racism and the belief that certain groups of people don't deserve their legal right to vote.

Crackdowns on Campus Protests

The 2024 and 2025 college campus crackdowns raise the question: Whose freedom? Not everyone has the same liberties or freedoms in this country. The freedom to protest without repercussion is still a privilege.

FUTURE NARRATIVE

Underlying Beliefs

- Democracy extends to all of us, no matter our race, religion, or gender. We have a collective responsibility to participate in democracy and protect it. Yet it's important to remember that each of us has different levels of privilege in our fight for democracy. We are often fighting for those who are unable to have their voices heard or to be out on the street.
- We believe that, civically, our actions and choices have consequences. Our actions influence not just our own lives, but our wider communities.
- Things can change and improve, but it requires action and engagement by the American people. Democracy works, but it's an everyday job.

Mainstream Manifestations

Blocking Executive Orders

Judges and courts have blocked several of the Trump Administration's Executive Orders to protect our democratic institutions and constitutional rights.

Hands Off and No Kings Protests

The nationwide “Hands Off” and “No Kings” protests have been historic in scope, calling to protect our democracy, civil society, and the rights of all people in this country, including immigrants, LGBTQ+ people, women, and other marginalized groups.

Bold Leadership

Leaders and organizers are speaking out against the administration's attempts to undermine democratic institutions, condemning political violence, and warning about growing threats against free speech.



Photo Credit: Caroline Kroon



Photo Credit: Jason Leung via Unsplash

FUTURE NARRATIVE 2: MULTIRACIAL DEMOCRACY

VP SA BREAKDOWN

Value Statement:



Our society is stronger when we have a diverse and representative democracy where we work together to create freedom and opportunity for all. Everyone deserves to have a say in the decisions that affect them.

Name the Problem:



While this vision of democracy is strong, the opposition is strategically limiting our freedoms and suppressing our voices.

Guidance Toward Solution:

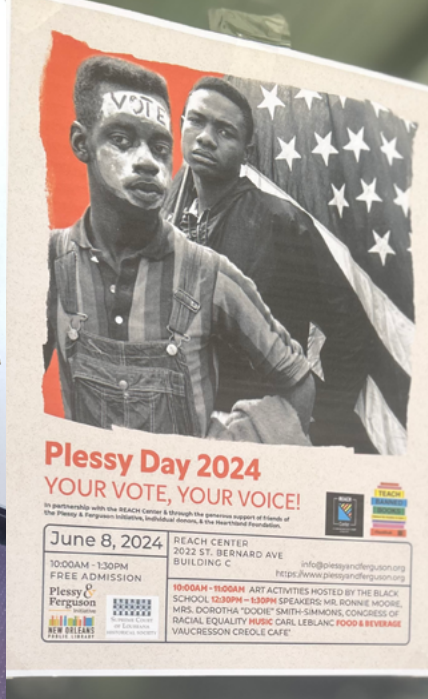


We all play a role when it comes to engaging in democracy. Democracy is an everyday job.

Collective Action:



We can use our voices and actions to reclaim the power bestowed upon us, whether in our own communities or beyond.



“

This is life work. This is nothing that you're going to solve in your lifetime, but day by day, take it one step at a time and that's what matters. That's how all of us matter. This is not just I work or you work, but we work. We all have a call to answer.

— DIVINE CANDICE HENDERSON,
FRIENDS OF FREEDOM HOUSE

NARRATIVE INTERVENTION CASE STUDY #WeMatter New Orleans



What They Did:

In 2023, The Opportunity Agenda invited 23 artists and advocates who work in the South to join our Beyond Democracy cohort. The goal of this cohort-based research was to examine the thinking of potential and current Southern voters of color and explore their civic motivations by meeting them where their interests lie.

The #We Matter campaign was one powerful community-based project that developed from this cohort and its learnings. Divine Candice Henderson Chandler of Friends of Freedom House and Raymond D. Sweet of Hollygrove Dixon Neighborhood Association organized the New Orleans-based campaign, which centered on values identified in the research as having “high motivational potential for civic engagement.” These values were Community, Legacy, and Defiance.

To test the power of these values, Divine and Raymond applied them as “narrative frames” for scripted videos of local community leaders and elders who told their stories of civic engagement. The videos targeted disenchanted Millennial audiences and connected them with voting opportunities and local community groups through social media and local pop-ups.

Why It Matters:

The #WeMatter New Orleans campaign sought to bridge the gap between perceived powerlessness and the realization that collective voices hold substantial influence in shaping the democratic landscape. The videos highlighted local examples of civic activism with lasting impact, such as securing \$25 million to reopen an historic African American beach or adding Renter's Rights to the Parish charter. They included interviews with respected community leaders—Sage Michael, Keturah Butler-Reed, and Joy Banner—scripted and produced by the award-winning Sunstar Gate Productions.

The campaign tracked several examples of shifting civic engagement from apathy into action, including connecting local college students who originally had “no plans to vote” to resources that allowed them to develop a voting plan, including voting by proxy. During a #WeMatter event with community doulas, a portion of attendees who had decided to sit out a forthcoming election changed their minds about it after speaking with the #WeMatter representatives.

As a community intervention, #WeMatter New Orleans demonstrates the power that values-based narratives—especially those that have been tested—can wield in promoting cross-generational connections for civic engagement.

FUTURE NARRATIVE 3:

Immigrant Opportunity

Fear Narrative

The anti-immigrant narratives that have a stronghold in this country often center on the harmful idea that members of our community who were not born in the United States are fundamentally different from those who were. It also assumes that citizenship and status are prizes that can be easily granted but also taken away. Most dangerously, many of these narratives are rooted in racist worldviews that center whiteness and maintaining traditional power structures.

Fear Narrative Values

Law and Order

Laws matter and are solely created to protect our communities. A world in which these laws aren't perfectly upheld represents a grave threat to our collective safety.

Fairness

The world ought to be fair, whether it's our economy, education system, or immigration policies.

“Security means freedom from fear and freedom to dream.

“We need to build and protect policies that allow people to flourish in this country.

Future Narrative

People across the world share a strong desire for freedom, the ability to provide for their families and communities, and the right to live safely. This is why so many people of all backgrounds make courageous sacrifices to start new lives in the United States. People working hard for a dignified life deserve a roadmap to live, thrive, and help build the world we want to live in. We need to build and protect policies that allow people to flourish in this country, including a just and humane immigration system.

Future Narrative Values

Solidarity

We believe in the humane and just treatment of all people in our country, which is why we stand up for our immigrant neighbors, regardless of where they come from or what they look like. We are in this struggle together.

Belonging

Belonging means having a meaningful voice and the opportunity to participate in the design of the political, social, and cultural structures that shape one's life.¹

Security

Everyone deserves to have their basic needs met and the opportunity to get ahead in life—from food on the table to a quality education and job that pays a living wage. Security means freedom from fear and freedom to dream.

It's important to remember that everyone has a set of values—even the people we disagree with. While we may sometimes claim the same values as our opposition, the way we define those values can differ significantly.

¹ Definition from The Othering and Belonging Institute. <https://belonging.berkeley.edu>.

FEAR NARRATIVE

Underlying Beliefs

Narratives are shaped and upheld by our underlying beliefs. These are beliefs that are both conscious and subconscious and shape how we understand the world around us.

- It is easy to immigrate to the United States legally and there are a variety of legal pathways for those who seek them.
- Immigrants intentionally exploit U.S. systems to come to this country.
- Immigrants take away from, rather than contribute to, the United States and its prosperity. These narratives often go further, portraying immigrants as altering the cultural and demographic makeup of the country in ways that are framed as threatening or harmful.

Mainstream Manifestations

Mainstream Manifestations are real-world examples that either display how the narratives we want to promote are already taking hold within our movements, or how common underlying beliefs can reinforce extreme ideas and conspiracy theories that harm our communities.

Great Replacement Theory

This conspiracy theory claims that pro-immigrant policies are part of an effort to reduce the political and cultural power of white people in the United States.

Criminality

Immigrants are portrayed as dangerous people from dangerous places who make the United States less safe.

Invasion/Flooding

Metaphors like “flooding” or “invasion” are used to stir fear and suggest that immigrants, particularly non-white immigrants, are overwhelming the country.

These mainstream manifestations are inherently rooted in racism, which is why they are so harmful and pernicious.

FUTURE NARRATIVE

Underlying Beliefs

- Our communities are strongest when we welcome people to the United States so they can flourish in this country.
- Movement, whether it be between cities, states, or countries, is a natural part of our modern world.
- Detaining, abducting and removing immigrants from the United States is cruel and inhumane.

Mainstream Manifestations

Protests Against ICE

Rallies for the release of community members abducted by ICE have occurred nationwide.

Student Protests

Mass mobilizations have been organized for students who have been abducted or detained for practicing their right to free speech.

Communities, Not Cages

Campaigns have launched to rapidly reshape how and why we use detention in this country.



Photo Credit: Bill Hatcher



Photo Credit: Molly Adams via Flickr



FUTURE NARRATIVE 3: IMMIGRANT OPPORTUNITY

VPSA BREAKDOWN

Value Statement:



People across the world share a strong desire for freedom, the ability to contribute and provide for their families and communities, and the right to live safely. This is why so many people of all backgrounds make courageous sacrifices to start new lives in the United States.

Name the Problem:



Instead of addressing the barriers people across our country face to achieving a better life, our politicians and mainstream culture have found a scapegoat in immigrants. Immigration enforcement agencies like ICE routinely intimidate, abduct, and detain immigrants, often without due process, threatening the safety and security of our communities. In addition to being inhumane, ICE's efforts cost working Americans billions of dollars, while elite politicians and private firms reap an immoral profit.

Guidance Toward Solution:



Our communities are strongest when we center policies, such as expanding sanctuary for people who immigrated here, and a culture rooted in advancing the shared goals of all people working for a better life.

Collective Action:



People working hard for a dignified life deserve a roadmap to live, thrive, and help build the world we want to live in. We need to build and protect policies that allow people to flourish in this country, including a just and humane immigration system.



“

This project is a celebration of the mosaic of people, cultures, talents, stories and countries of origin that make New York and New Yorkers so special... I hope people value the importance of diversity and how different backgrounds, experiences, and cultures enrich us as a society and make us stronger.

– OSCAR CASTILLO, RESPONDING TO THE NEW YORK PROUD CAMPAIGN

NARRATIVE INTERVENTION CASE STUDY New York Proud

What They Did:

In 2024, The Opportunity Agenda collaborated with New York Immigration Coalition, F.Y.Eye, and award-winning photographer Oscar Castillo on a public multimedia campaign to highlight the positive contributions and important role that immigrants play in our community. The **New York Proud project** featured photographic portraits of immigrant New Yorkers displayed across NYC public transit. The portraits were accompanied by stories honoring the New York immigrant experience—vignettes of their lives in New York City, what brought them to America, and the integral role they play in their communities.

The pop-up photo exhibit lived on subway platforms and posters across all five NYC boroughs for more than a month, including a launch in Times Square. Each exhibit placement included a QR code and link to background information, interviews with participants, and **a toolkit designed by TOA for cultural strategists**. Through these public photo exhibitions in high-traffic areas and subway platforms, we were able to garner 9 million impressions and reach new audiences that we would not have otherwise.

Why It Matters:

Our goal for the campaign was to “flood the airwaves” with pro-immigrant content and help re-establish NYC’s history as a hub of pro-immigrant sentiment. The project leaned into this more nuanced view of contribution as something that goes beyond just labor. Rather, *immigrants are New Yorkers*—they are an integral part of the social and economic fabric of this city. This narrative builds power not just for immigrant communities, but *within* them. Embracing narrative change in this holistic sense became central to the campaign. Immigrant New Yorkers are our lawyers, our favorite chefs, our dance floor companions, and so many other essential members of our city.



Photo courtesy of TOA





“ When we engage in narrative strategy, we’re doing more than storytelling—we’re shifting power.

Photo Credit: Emma Dau via Unsplash

FUTURE OVER FEAR: TOOLS TO BUILD A DIFFERENT STORY

Designing Values-Based Campaigns



Photo Credit: Shot by Somali

Planning Your Narrative Strategy

Whether you're crafting a campaign, building power on the ground, or making art that speaks to justice, **narrative strategy** gives you a roadmap for shaping how people see, feel, and act on the issues that matter most.

Narratives don't just shape how people think—they shape what policies feel possible, which futures feel believable, and who is seen as deserving. When we engage in narrative strategy, we're doing more than **storytelling**—we're shifting power.

STRONG NARRATIVES CAN:

- > Shape public perception of what's normal and possible.
- > Frame problems and solutions, guiding how we respond.
- > Define who's seen as deserving of rights, protection, and care.
- > Align communities and sectors around a shared vision.

When a narrative gains traction, it shows up in media and **culture**, shifts attitudes, and pressures decision-makers to act. But that shift doesn't happen by accident—it takes coordination, collaboration, and time.

What Is Narrative Strategy?

Narrative strategy is the intentional practice of shaping public understanding through stories, values, and culture. It's how movements—and institutions, corporations, and political actors—build the overarching stories that influence what people see as normal, acceptable, or possible.

And it's not exclusive to social justice: many dominant narratives upholding inequality and exclusion are the result of strategic planning. That's why it's essential for artists, organizers, advocates, and storytellers to work together to advance Future Narratives—ones grounded in lived experience, rooted in shared values, and made real through culture.

Elements of Cultural Strategy

Like narrative strategy, **cultural strategy** requires establishing a clear vision and values, powerful and consistent storytelling, and time. Once you've established a strong narrative strategy, how can you develop cultural strategies that resonate, motivate, and inspire?

1. Theory of Change Development

A Theory of Change should outline short- and long-term goals and the activities we need to pursue to get there, allowing us to stay focused on our vision. Think of this as your map. Commissioning a mural? A set of murals? Over 3 years? Your Theory of Change can provide useful context that helps collaborators, partners, and even funders connect the dots between your strategies and your vision. If you're interested in the field of cultural strategy, this is a good place to start. Can you invest in or fundraise for the development of a Theory of Change for your cultural strategies?

2. Cultural Audits

Cultural audits provide a deep understanding of your audiences by analyzing their media choices. They are essential for understanding your audience. USC Annenberg's Norman Lear Center describes stories as the "currency of our culture" and these stories are largely transmitted via media. As such, studying your audience's relationship to different media can provide valuable insight to guide your storytelling as part of your cultural strategy. Cultural audits can help you determine where to find your audience, identify points of connection with your audience, and identify storytelling opportunities and effective and trusted messengers.

Cultural audits can involve focus groups, surveys, social media listening, and interviews. It's important to develop a budget to meet your needs and establish your capacity to conduct an audit as this is best left to the professionals.

3. Content Creation, Live Events

Once you've conducted a cultural audit and understand who is influencing your audience, how, and where, then you can begin to identify potential creative collaborators. Our community has worked with podcast hosts, comedians, faith leaders, food bloggers, musicians, and more. How can you best communicate with your audience? Who will you work with?



Amplifier

Amplifier is a nonprofit media lab building campaigns to amplify the most important movements of our times, by any medium necessary.



THE CENTER FOR
CULTURAL
POWER

The Center for Cultural Power

The Center for Cultural Power is a cultural strategy nonprofit that activates and mobilizes BIPOC artists to envision a world in which cultural, economic, and political power are distributed equitably.



pillars

Pillars Fund

Pillars Fund amplifies the leadership, narratives, and talents of Muslims in the United States to advance opportunity and justice for all.



Scope Of Work (SOW)

Scope Of Work represents early- and mid-career BIPOC creators ages 17-24, including photographers, filmmakers, and designers.



YES. AND
LAUGHTER LAB

Yes, And Laughter Lab (YALL)

The Laughter Lab connects comedians to the entertainment industry, social justice orgs, and activists who can help bring their work into the comedy marketplace and into movements for social change.

4. Creative Networks

At The Opportunity Agenda, we're working toward establishing a society where cultural strategies play a significant role in social change and we're committed to building a community of cultural strategy practitioners. This involves cultivating and supporting a network of artists and creatives among organizers, funders, and other advocates. To do this, we regularly organize national convenings and grow our community through programs such as our Narrative Innovators Lab and Creative Change Retreat. This allows us to facilitate collaboration across issue areas, fields, mediums, and geography.

It can be daunting to try to invest in a cultural strategy that requires artists or creatives if you don't know where to turn! The good news is that there are many innovative and dedicated collectives supporting narrative-forward artists and creatives working in a wide range of mediums from comedy to film. **See sidebar on the previous page for a list of our favorites.**



Photo Credit: Christina Wocintechchat via Unsplash

5. Distribution and Engagement Plan

Just as it's important to be strategic about how you communicate with your audience, it's equally important to have a plan to distribute your content and build engagement. When we partnered with Amplifier in 2020 to develop the [We Can Thrive Together](#) campaign to support educators and students with at-home learning resources during the pandemic, lesson plans were distributed via Amplifier's newsletter to a network of over 15,000 educators across the United States. The open source artwork we commissioned was available for download via TOA and Amplifier's websites in high resolution. Readers were encouraged to interact with us via social media platforms. We were able to track the widespread use of the lesson plans and artwork via metrics, such as open rates, artwork downloads, and social media engagement.



TOA PRO TIP:

Pro Tip for those building cultural interventions: As you move through the steps of the Narrative Framework in the next section, pay special attention to *Step 5: Narrative Interventions*. That's where you'll find guidance on how to activate your values and audience insights through creative, collaborative strategies that move people closer to your narrative vision.

The next section sets the stage for turning your narrative plan and cultural strategy into real-world impact.

As you explore ways to advance change through culture, it's important to ground your work in strong narrative strategy. When aligned, narrative and cultural strategies reinforce each other—moving hearts, minds, and policy together. A strong framework helps you connect your long-term vision to tangible action by aligning your goals, audiences, and tactics—something we'll walk through in the Narrative Framework that follows.

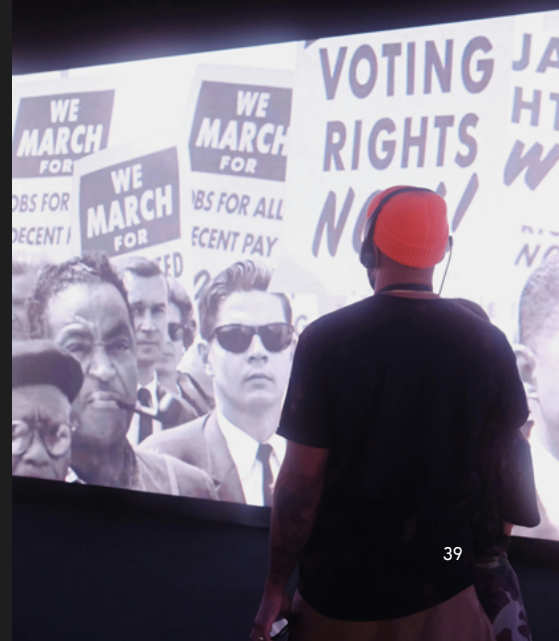




Photo Credit: Caroline Kroon

Why Narrative Strategy Matters

Narrative and cultural strategies work together to shape beliefs and move people. You can't shift public narratives without also shifting the culture that holds them in place.

TOA's Narrative Framework

The Opportunity Agenda's Narrative Framework is a step-by-step guide to help you disrupt harmful narratives and replace them with those that support your values and vision. Whether your work is in policy, organizing, storytelling, or art, this framework helps you design strategies that shift mindsets and inspire action.

Our Narrative Framework provides a structured approach to:

- Help you design a clear narrative strategy that aligns with your vision.
- Lay the groundwork for powerful narrative interventions—campaigns, artworks, stories, or cultural moments that reach the right audiences.
- Strategize how to bring those audiences with you, turning them into amplifiers and champions of your vision.

How to Use the Narrative Framework

STEP 1

Identifying Your Future Narrative & Shared Values

Your **narrative vision** is the big-picture story you want to help bring to life—the long-term shift in worldview that your work aims to support. It should be rooted in your core values and paint a clear picture of the future you're working toward. This is your **Future Narrative**. Use it to guide all messages and actions.



TOA PRO TIP:

As you begin identifying your Future Narrative, take a look at the examples we included in the *Future Over Fear* section in this toolkit (page 22).

ASK YOURSELF:



- > What story should lead the public conversation?
- > What values and communities are centered?
- > What does the world look like if this narrative prevails?

STEP 2

Identifying Prevailing Narratives & Underlying Beliefs

Understand the **prevailing narratives** already shaping public perception of your issue. Prevailing narratives are the dominant ideas and overarching stories that influence what people think is normal, acceptable, or inevitable. They're often repeated in the media, culture, politics, and everyday conversation, and they reflect deeply held beliefs about how the world works and who belongs.

Narratives are built on **underlying beliefs**—ideas about who is deserving, what's possible, and what's broken. These beliefs are often rooted in history, bias, and cultural norms, and they can be reinforced without people realizing it.

ASK YOURSELF:



- > What overarching stories are currently shaping how people understand this issue?
- > What beliefs, values, or emotions are embedded in these stories?
- > Where are these narratives showing up—in the media, pop culture, or public discourse?

STEP 3

Setting Your Narrative Goals

Define the shifts in beliefs or mindsets you want to spark. **Narrative goals** link your Future Narrative with real-world change and guide your tactics, messaging, cultural projects, and organizing efforts. Think of your narrative goals as the strategic bridge between where things are and where you want them to go.

YOUR GOALS SHOULD:

- > Reflect your Future Narrative.
- > Challenge harmful underlying beliefs.
- > Inform your strategy and interventions.

Identifying Priority Audiences

Know who you're trying to reach, how they relate to the issue, and what motivates them. This isn't just about demographics—it's about understanding people's values, beliefs, cultural context, and emotional connection to the issue. Your goal is to meet people where they are and give them stories, messages, and cultural experiences that resonate.



TOA PRO TIP:

You can go deeper into audience strategy and segmentation in the *Audience Segmentation* section of this toolkit. Page 15.

ASK YOURSELF:



- > Who has the most potential to shift the narrative?
- > Who can you activate or equip to speak out?

Identifying Narrative Interventions

Narrative Interventions are intentional, creative actions designed to disrupt prevailing narratives, challenge harmful assumptions, and bring your audience closer to your Future Narrative.

Interventions can take many forms: messaging campaigns, murals, short films, storytelling series, reports, or community events. What matters most isn't the format—it's the purpose. These aren't just communication tactics. They're strategic disruptions that shift beliefs, engage emotions, and activate values. They help your audience see the issue differently—and begin to imagine and support something better.

To count as a narrative intervention, your tactic should:

- > Be rooted in your narrative goals.
- > Target a clearly defined audience.
- > Intentionally challenge or reinforce key beliefs and values.
- > Be part of a broader strategy (not just a one-off moment)
- > Be measurable, with some way to track impact.

Measuring Narrative Impact

Narrative change takes time—but that doesn't mean we can't track progress along the way. Even if your ultimate goals are long-term shifts in culture or policy, short-term signals can tell you whether your interventions are starting to land.

This is about figuring out how you'll assess what your intervention is doing—not just in terms of outputs (what you created), but also outcomes (what changed because of it).

Why Evaluation Matters

Narrative change is never a straight line. Evaluation gives you the chance to listen, reflect, and adjust—because not every message will land the way you expect, and not every audience will respond the same way.

Once you've built your narrative strategy using our framework, the next step is putting it into action.

In the next section, we'll walk through three key ways to get your message out: creating content for social and digital spaces, working with traditional media, and collaborating with creatives.



Photo courtesy of TOA

Getting Your Message Out

Once you've designed your narrative intervention, you can use the VPSA structure to develop key messages for the audiences you're trying to reach. Communicators have more options than ever to get their message out into the world, including owned media, earned media, and creative projects.

Each has unique advantages, challenges, and best practices to ensure your values-based messaging is effective and persuasive.

Owned Media Has Power



Social media has become a primary source for newsworthy information and a powerful platform for social justice organizations. Unlike traditional earned media, which depends on news outlets to report your story, social platforms offer direct control over your narrative, allowing for stories to be told with greater nuance and care. This owned media space enables organizations to prioritize affirmative imagery and values-based messaging that advances liberatory narratives.

Earned Media Builds Trust & Credibility



The media landscape has changed significantly over the last couple of decades, but earned media is still an important part of a communications strategy. Gaining coverage for your issues and initiatives opens you up to new audiences and gets your message out to more people. There are a number of ways to engage in traditional media: sending out reactions to breaking news events, landing an interview with a reporter, writing an op-ed or letter to the editor, and engaging with reporters and editors or editorial boards to provide them background context for an issue. Remember, time is of the essence when seeking to insert your voice in rapidly shifting news cycles. Preparing your message ahead of time can help you act fast.

Cultural Strategies Build Bridges



Building relationships and working with diverse artists, activists, and cultural organizers can lead to powerful partnerships that advance social justice and promote themes and storylines that align with your key messages. Bringing together issue experts, advocates, activists, artists, and other creatives can build transformative bridges between the ideas and solutions we're promoting and the culture in which we live, work, and play. Cultural strategy is highly collaborative and deeply resonates with audiences. Especially in owned media spaces, authenticity is key. Part of the reason creative storytelling moves people powerfully is that it taps into shared values and experiences in ways that rehearsed talking points fall short.

When you're designing a values-based campaign, you will need to decide which domain(s) make the most sense for your narrative goals and target audiences.

On the following pages review our tips and tricks for designing impactful, targeted campaigns:

When you're creating content for social or digital spaces...

Choose Platforms Strategically



Focus your efforts where your target audience is most active. It's better to post consistently on one or two platforms than to spread yourself thin in too many online spaces where you don't have time to cultivate regular engagement.

Set Clear Goals



Define whether you're building an engaged community of supporters, converting followers into donors, or disseminating information about key issues, and build your content strategy around those objectives. Prioritize meaningful engagement—comments, shares, and saves—over passive reach (total followers, for example).

Use Trends Thoughtfully



Engage with trending topics and sounds when they align with your mission. Memes, hashtags, and viral moments can expand your reach. Stay flexible and adapt to algorithm changes by adjusting your content strategy. Remember that some platforms limit use of trending audios for business accounts, so be mindful to use in-app available audio to avoid copyright strikes (see below).



Engage with trending topics and sounds when they align with your mission.



Photo Credit: Shot by Somi

Think Like a Marketer



Social media requires time and resources, including dedicated budgets for ongoing social media advertising or influencer marketing campaigns. Depending on your goals and the platform, paid ads are often necessary to reach new audiences or convert social media followers into email subscribers and donors. Use campaigns to grow your base and drive action.

Tell Real, Powerful Stories



Use social media to share victories and successes that paint a picture of the world you're building, especially when traditional media doesn't cover these stories. By amplifying voices of those directly impacted by harmful systems and sharing stories of real people taking action, you can inspire others to mobilize and make activism feel accessible. Authenticity builds trust.

Stay Legal and Ethical



Get informed consent and signed releases before sharing personal stories online, respect copyright laws and limits on the "fair use" of media, and give proper credit with permission when sharing content from other creators. Develop a proactive plan for handling trolls, bots, or hate comments to protect your organization, staff, and the people whose stories you're sharing.

Partner With Purpose

- Work with influencers who align with your values and audiences. Focus on long-term, trust-based partnerships. Provide clear calls to action for their followers.

Make the Most of Video

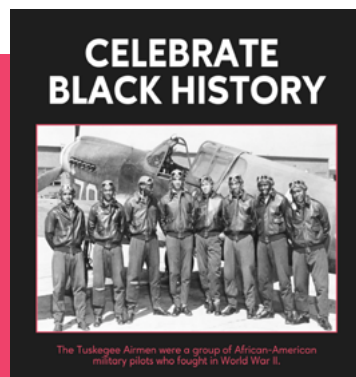
- Video performs best on many social media platforms. Use it to tell real stories, spotlight advocacy wins, and connect emotionally. Always add captions and optimize for sound-off viewing. Above all, have fun! Breaking up heavy issues with light-hearted, informative content can inspire engagement.

Create Bite-Sized, Platform-Specific Content

- Tailor content for each platform—quick vertical video clips for TikTok and Instagram, longer pieces and horizontal video for Facebook and YouTube. Break complex issues into digestible segments that viewers can quickly understand and share with others. Remember to hook audiences in the early seconds by making clear what your video is about and who it's for, and don't forget a call to action! Each platform provides their optimal video specs; follow them for length and format to improve your reach.



Break complex issues into digestible segments.



Follow us on Instagram @oppagenda for more examples.

Measure and Learn

- Track engagement metrics to understand what resonates with your audience, but also listen to qualitative feedback from the communities you serve. Use these insights to refine your approach and ensure your content truly advances your social justice goals rather than just generating views.

When you're working with traditional media...

Build Reporter Relationships

- The best way to build strong relationships with reporters is to understand their needs, deadlines, and what makes a story newsworthy. Reporters work fast and appreciate sources who are responsive and reliable. Regularly making yourself available helps them—and increases the chances they'll come to you again. Following the news closely also helps you anticipate when journalists might need a quote, reaction, or expert voice on an issue.

To assess if your story is newsworthy, ask: Is it timely, local, unexpected, trending, relevant to the audience, or tied to a prominent voice? Good media engagement goes beyond getting spokespeople in front of cameras. You can also shape coverage behind the scenes by crafting strong pitches, selecting compelling messengers, and working with producers and editors to shape stories “on background”—making sure to highlight your narrative, values, and solutions.

Choose Spokespeople



Busy reporters working on a deadline tend to go with the spokespeople you pitch them. This is a great opportunity for you to consider who embodies your narrative, including the values and human consequences at stake. This may not be your executive director or a member of your management team. Think about who your audience might relate to, and consider that messages can be made more powerful when they come from an unexpected voice.

Some knowledgeable and trusted messengers who can help change audiences' minds about an issue include:

- > Enlightened insiders: people who have spent time inside a system, recognized the need for change, and are willing to speak out.
- > Affected change agents: someone who was affected by a flawed system and took action to change it.



REMEMBER: It's important to understand the audience you're trying to reach before you decide on the best messenger for them. You can dive deeper into identifying your target audience in the Audience Strategy section of this toolkit (*Leading With Values*. Page 15.)

Prep for Interviews



Staying on message is not easy and requires practice. Use the VPSA framework (page 18) to organize your thoughts and focus on one clear, persuasive point, especially for short interviews. Know your audience and prepare accordingly. Remember, the goal is persuasion, not just publicity, so make sure your message truly lands, even if the reporter is including an unhelpful angle or interviewing someone with an opposing message.

If possible, schedule the interview so you can prepare in a quiet space. If it's unscheduled, it's fine to ask for a few minutes to collect yourself—hydrate, find quiet, and jot down your VPSA. Practice with colleagues and rehearse tough questions to build confidence and reduce nerves.

Project Your Power



Interviews can be nerve-wracking, even for experienced spokespeople. Remind yourself you're an expert, and draw on past experience speaking about the issue. Practice answering your most dreaded question to stay grounded and unflappable.

It's important to note that a lot of your message comes through in your body language and tone of voice, especially in video and audio content. In fact, some experts estimate that only 7 percent of an audience's understanding comes from the words you speak—body language and tone of voice matter most. Your audiences will be subconsciously thinking, "Do I relate to this person? Do I trust what they're saying?"



TOA PRO TIP:

For confrontational interview questions use the **pivot** to steer back to your message. Give a short, noninteresting answer to the question you were asked and follow it with one of these shortcut phrases:

- > "What's really important about this issue is..."
- > "What I want people to understand is..."
- > "What I'm here to talk about is..."

When you're working with creatives...

Among the beliefs that guide our approach to cultural strategy is the idea that supporting and connecting diverse artists, activists, and cultural organizers, and convening them in creative and unusual ways, will generate transformative ideas, solutions, and partnerships that advance social justice. Part of our role in supporting and connecting artists, activists, and other cultural leaders is a commitment to modeling best practices for cross-collaboration. We've compiled a few guidelines for working with creatives below.



Photo Credit:
Tom Barrett via Unsplash

Match the Medium to Maximize Impact



The medium you choose matters. Weigh the pros and cons of specific forms and be strategic. For example, comedy is often well-suited for approaching taboo topics, while film and television can create emotional connections. Sporting events unite diverse, often large audiences under one roof. Choose the medium that will allow you to maximize your impact.

Do Your Research



Does the visual artist you're approaching specialize in murals? Work with mosaic art? Where are they based and does this matter for your project? Share your interests with friends and peers and seek recommendations. What does this type of commission or partnership cost?

Start Early



Partnering with creatives is most effective when you cultivate authentic partnerships. This means that you are communicating your narrative vision and allowing them to lead the creative process as part of your strategy development. It's OK to create some guidelines or a creative brief that provides insight into your inspiration, motivations, vision, and values. You can also communicate specific limitations (for example, specifying that you want to avoid depicting real public officials).

Understand the Nuances of Working With Celebrities



Movie stars, famous athletes, and rock stars have the unique ability to draw attention to, raise funds for, and persuade their fan bases on important social causes. But these partnerships must be clearly defined—you are aiming for customized, authentic connections with a person you may be in relationship with for the long term.

Embrace Short- and Long-Term Strategies in Your Approach



Are you asking your audience to get involved? Stay informed? Take action? Cultural strategies can allow you to reach larger audiences; amplify existing efforts; target new audiences; and, most importantly, create the drumbeat that brings narratives to life. This means that there's a role for short-term and long-term cultural strategy. The culture we want to see, our Future Narratives realized—necessitates a breakdown of the status quo that requires consistency, repetition, and widespread buy-in.

Pay Artists Fairly



Be clear about deliverables and timeline. Ask for a quote. Again, if you do your research, you can budget or fundraise for the cost of the collaboration and have options.

GLOSSARY

OF KEY TERMS

CULTURAL STRATEGY

Cultural strategy brings the fields of advocacy and arts & culture into alignment and alliance for social change. A strong cultural strategy activates our narrative strategy and builds momentum for change by helping us think big to effectively meet audiences where they are. The spectrum of creativity from grassroots to Hollywood to “art for art’s sake” each has the potential to move hearts and minds, inspire action, and build the public will for lasting change.

CULTURE

Culture refers to both a community’s specific values, practices, and systems, as well as cultural domains from the most popular to the most niche, including sports, theatre, visual art, comedy, pet social media fandoms, and more.

EQUITY

Equity is the understanding that all people are created with equal rights, inherent dignity, and the potential for creativity and growth. Dedication to equity is essential for working toward a more just and antiracist society.

FEAR NARRATIVES

Fear Narratives are the narratives used to stoke fear, create chaos and division, and ultimately upend the progress we have made in our movements.

FUTURE NARRATIVES

Future Narratives are the narratives rooted in TOA’s vision of a world where equity, justice, opportunity, and inclusion are available to all.

MESSAGES

Messages are developed for a specific opportunity and should be tailored according to medium, venue, and audience. Collections of messages—including individual stories—are what help to construct a narrative. While messages will fit within our larger frame and reflect an issue’s narrative, they will vary in tone, vocabulary, length, and other considerations. Examples of messages include speeches, articles, episodes of TV shows or podcasts, films, and op-eds.

MESSAGING FRAME

Messaging Frame is a message that displays a certain way of framing an issue. For example, in immigration work we may want folks to center their thinking around the contribution of immigrants to our communities and culture. Here we could use a contribution frame to shape our messaging around the different ways that immigrants are members of our communities.

NARRATIVE

A narrative is an overarching story, rooted in shared values and common themes, that influences how people process information and make decisions. Repeated over time, narratives shape public perception and influence public policy.

NARRATIVE GOALS

Narrative goals translate your long-term vision into focused, strategic action—fueling the interventions, messages, and cultural efforts that help shift public understanding. It defines the beliefs you want to challenge, the values you want to uplift, and the themes that will bring your narrative to life. A strong narrative goal serves as a compass for your work, helping you move audiences toward your vision while disrupting harmful narratives and the underlying mindsets that sustain them.

NARRATIVE INTERVENTION

Narrative interventions are how you move your strategy from plan to impact. They are intentional, creative actions designed to disrupt prevailing narratives, challenge harmful assumptions, and bring your audience closer to your narrative vision—so they not only see it, but begin to carry it forward with you.

NARRATIVE STRATEGY

Narrative strategy is the intentional practice of shaping public understanding through stories, values, and culture. It’s how movements—as well as institutions, corporations, and political actors—shape the prevailing narratives that influence what people see as normal, acceptable, or possible. While social justice movements use narrative strategy to advance equity and liberation, many harmful narratives are also the

GLOSSARY

OF KEY TERMS

result of careful, strategic planning. Narrative strategy helps us intervene in that landscape—shifting mindsets, sparking imagination, and building power through the stories we tell and repeat.

NARRATIVE VISION

The Narrative Vision is what you want to help bring to life—the long-term shift in worldview that your work aims to support—and make prevail over the opposition’s narrative. It should be rooted in your core values and paint a clear picture of the future you’re working toward.

PREVAILING NARRATIVES

Prevailing Narratives are the dominant ideas and stories that influence what people think is normal, acceptable, or inevitable. They’re often repeated in media, culture, politics, and everyday conversation, and they reflect deeply held beliefs about how the world works and who belongs.

SHARED VALUES

Shared values are the principles and beliefs that we all care about and collectively aspire toward. These values connect us to our audiences and can be stronger than the thoughts and ideas that divide us. Audiences are more receptive to unfamiliar arguments when framed by shared values. Present the problem you are working to resolve in your advocacy work by identifying how our shared values are at stake and threatened by socio-political issues.

STORYTELLING

Storytelling refers to the structure, elements, and practice of sharing our messages. Building and relaying our messages in the form of stories provide us with opportunities to highlight core themes, values, and characters that strengthen our overall narrative. Stories contain characters, conflict, imagery, lessons learned, and resolution.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

Strategic communication refers to the efforts to use communications to achieve both short- and long-term goals for your movement. This differs from narrative change, which 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.

TARGET AUDIENCE

The target audience is the groups and individuals whose behaviors you need to change to reach your goal.

UNDERLYING BELIEFS

Underlying beliefs are the deep-seated ideas people hold—often without realizing—about who deserves what, what’s possible, and what’s broken in our society. Shaped by history, bias, and cultural norms, these beliefs are often tied to people’s values and guide how they interpret messages and stories.

VALUES

Values are the core beliefs that guide our thinking, shape our behavior, and reflect the world we want to live in.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Future Over Fear: Tools to Build a Different Story toolkit is the result of messaging research, input from the field, and communications strategy best practices over the past decade. This work also relied heavily on the input of a committee of advisors. Special thanks to Anika Fassia, Laura Hughes, Keith Kamisugi, and Cecilie Surasky.

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