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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



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# 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.