Narrative Engagement Across Difference (NEAD)
Exploration of Counter Narrative & Engagement Strategies

Prepared for the Horizons Project by Alison Castel

This compendium of short case studies is designed to support strategy discussions, training sessions, and narrative framing choices across movements and the social sector working for rights, freedoms and democracy. We explore key tensions and decision points when considering when and how to "counter" narratives we feel are harmful through a series of real-world examples. The following series of caselets is not meant to be comprehensive, but rather offers touchpoints for reflection, sensemaking, and design choices.

We invite you to read these sections with curiosity: What tensions feel familiar in your own work? What stories are missing or struggling to emerge? What kinds of relational infrastructure might help your community or coalition move toward broader resonance, allowing for more narrative complexity and legitimacy that would invite broader participation?

Counter Narrative & Narrative Engagement

The Horizons Project is committed to exploring and applying narrative practices that help build broad, sustainable movements capable of disrupting harmful logics and reshaping the narrative terrain in which authoritarianism, xenophobia, and dehumanization take hold. Successful pluralistic movements fighting for democracy and human rights are inclusive of a wide diversity of actors, across ideologies, geographies, sectors and other identities. Therefore, narrative *engagement* can be a useful approach to support these kinds of broad movements by helping to create the conditions for unlikely allies to come together, collaborate and sustain action over time.

With the ever-evolving narrative terrain in which these diverse movements are operating, there are times when our collective goal is to dislodge harmful or unhelpful narratives, i.e., we are *countering* what we are against. For example, a key tactic of authoritarians is to peddle in fear of others in order to create an "us" and "them." Dehumanization of entire groups (Haitians eating cats and dogs in Ohio) is an othering tactic we want to counter. The question is how we do this strategically and in service of our long-term goals.

Engagement across difference requires a deep reflection on how our counter-narrative strategies might inadvertently feed into authoritarian dynamics: dividing communities, overwhelming the public, and reinforcing simplified, binary thinking, right when we most need space for complexity, nuance, and collective imagination. Sometimes, the stories we use to resist can unintentionally replicate the same divisive logics we hope to disrupt.

At the heart of this approach is a shift, not just in strategy, but in how we understand narrative itself. Too often, narratives are treated as instruments: tools we wield to win hearts, craft messages, or shift opinion. But the Narrative Engagement Across Difference (NEAD) Initiative

is rooted in a deeper orientation to support our change-making: thinking narratively. (Please consult Horizons materials on Thinking Narratively for a deeper dive.)

Thinking narratively means recognizing that narratives are not just stories we tell about the world, but rather those stories that are actively shaping the world. They influence what feels possible, legitimate, and worth caring about. They define who gets seen, who gets silenced, and what kinds of futures are imaginable. And crucially, people don't always choose the narratives they are caught up in. Often, those stories are inherited, imposed, or shaped by larger systems. That is why a posture of engagement starts with taking ***narrative as an object of inquiry***. Distinct from a persuasion strategy that may seek to replace one story with another, the goal of engaging across difference asks different questions:

- Who benefits from this telling?
- Who is left out?
- What assumptions or emotional logics does it carry?
- What becomes visible, and what stays hidden?

The answers to questions like these will vary depending on who is doing the asking, so the process of exploring the narrative terrain is best done in community with others. (To dig more into the process of Narrative Landscape Mapping, you can find more resources here.) Thinking about narrative as an object for inquiry helps to uncover and better understand when there is divergence in our deeper meaning making systems.

For those convening, facilitating or participating in diverse movements, this posture of open inquiry aids in cultivating more complex, legitimizing, and generative narratives that can hold real difference without collapsing into sameness or othering.

Counter Narratives: Movements often begin by honoring the lived experiences of those most impacted by systemic harm. We name what we are up against, assign motives to those who are upholding or carrying out injustice, and seek to uplift stories that may provoke outrage, disrupt complacency and inspire defiance. In moments of crisis or injustice, this oppositional framing can be necessary because it mobilizes anger, signals urgency, and asserts moral clarity. At the same time, this countering approach can reinforce the very binaries it seeks to move beyond.

As narrative practitioners, we are exploring ways to complement these galvanizing calls for resistance with stories that invite broader solidarity, hold different lived experiences, surface shared stakes, and point toward collective possibility. This is not an either/or choice. Rather, we acknowledge the natural tensions between the urgent calling out of egregious harms, while also calling in new allies and creating a variety of onramps to a shared cause. To build durable change, long-term narrative strategies are strengthened by pointing toward shared values and future possibilities with stories that hold intersectional struggles, collective aspirations, and that create space for the broadest participation.

Counter-narrative work doesn't happen in a vacuum. It unfolds within a larger architecture of meaning and narrative power, where dominant narratives, inherited logics, and mental models shape how people make sense of the world. These narratives don't just reflect reality, they define

what counts as common sense, whose concerns are seen as valid, and which explanations are taken seriously. Often absorbed unconsciously, they are also reinforced intentionally, through repetition, reward, and institutional power, and sustained through media and daily practices, making them difficult to recognize, let alone challenge. They simplify complex issues in ways that benefit some while marginalizing others and can persist even when deeply contested.

Horizons' exploration of counter narratives seeks to surface these tensions and trade-offs, specifically in the context of authoritarian resurgence, when the narrative terrain is so deeply influenced by fear-based, toxic othering with real world impacts that clearly need disruption. We have been gathering insights from research and practice to support "big tent" organizing, particularly in understanding how narrative power is shaped, deployed, and felt across communities. The NEAD initiative has not been centering the narrative strategies intended to persuade and mobilize a "base" of supporters, but rather strategies that shift the conditions that shape which stories are possible, legitimate, and able to carry collective meaning beyond traditional allies.

Overview

The purpose of this document is to explore counter-narrative strategies as a way to expand both the participants and the possibilities in building a more just, democratic future. **Some definitions**:

Narrative engagement refers to the practice of working inside meaning systems, surfacing, disrupting, and reweaving the stories that shape public life. It means engaging stories not just as messages, but as forces that operate emotionally, culturally, and systemically.

Narrative strategy refers to the intentional design of interventions to shift those systems.

Narrative power names the capacity to shape what stories are seen as legitimate, imaginable, and worth acting on. In doing so, it influences how power is distributed, contested, and maintained.

The tensions and strategies are organized into three thematic sections:

The Architecture of Narrative Power and Complexity

In this section we explore how dominant narratives shape meaning-making and why narrative interventions must engage deeper assumptions, not just surface stories. Some of the questions:

1. If people think narratively, what is the impact of advocating by single issue?
2. Are we engaging enough with the dominant narratives that regulate meaning-making?
3. Narrative practitioners often seek to find the magic words to convince people to think differently about an issue instead of operating at the level of mental models.
4. Embracing narrative complexity and uncertainty is at odds with the strategic communications imperatives to keep messages simple so that they stick.

Strategies for Disrupting Entrenched Narratives

In this section, we highlight how movements can expose cracks in dominant stories, redirect attention, and plant new narrative seeds. The questions we ask include:

5. Can we find cracks in the dominant narratives instead of trying to uproot them?
6. How can we avoid over-amplifying harmful narratives?
7. Are we aware enough of the "boomerang effect" to avoid it?
8. Humor, when used strategically, can disrupt entrenched narratives by exposing their contradictions and absurdities. But it requires care: mockery and simplification can provoke backlash or entrench the very narratives one seeks to challenge.

Strategies for Relational Narrative Engagement

This section explores how narratives position people in relation to one another, and how relational, systemic strategies can expand belonging and sustain meaning-making across difference. We ask the following questions:

9. What is the impact of framing our work in win-lose terms and positioning it as a narrative battle?
10. Facts alone rarely persuade, and narratives must connect emotionally, but have we found the right containers to explore those emotions?
11. How can we best elevate delegitimized stories that can be truly heard and explored together?
12. Villains make for good storytelling, but do they undermine our long-term goals?
13. Emotions are complex; anger and outrage are strong mobilizing forces but also might reinforce fear and entrenched overly simplified identities.
14. It's hard to avoid delegitimizing/alienating language, even toward opponents.

Caselets as Examples: The following caselets are not meant to be comprehensive examples of narrative engagement. Rather, they highlight moments where narrative dynamics, such as shifts in emotional resonance, cultural legitimacy, and moral framing played a visible role in shaping broader perception and response.

They are illustrative, not exhaustive. They show what happens when stories shift, even if the behind-the-scenes work of cultivation, facilitation, or contestation isn't always visible. That deeper work of engaging dominant narratives, exploring tensions, expanding meaning systems, and navigating emotional and cultural complexity is often less visible but no less essential. These snapshots are included as narrative touchpoints: entryways into understanding how stories operate in public life, and how shifts in narrative logic can signal broader social and political change. While these tensions don't offer a unified strategy, and in some cases may pull in different directions, they are intended to invite strategic discernment based on context, risk, and values. We hope they invite further reflection about the kinds of narrative engagement we're already doing, and ways to move forward together.

The Architecture of Narrative Power and Complexity

This section explores how narrative strategies must begin by naming and engaging that underlying structure. From the temptation to reduce stories to single issues, to the search for "magic words" that bypass mental models, to the pressures of simplifying complexity in service of clarity, these cases examine how narrative strategies succeed, or stall, depending on their ability to surface deeper assumptions and expand public meaning-making.'

Each caselet below includes related resources as a starting point for further exploration. They're included here as references, not as endorsements or exhaustive accounts.

1. If people think narratively, what is the impact of advocating by single issue?

Narrative landscapes shape how people understand intersecting issues. If our goal is to foster public discussions and promote values of the common good, a healthy narrative landscape would include complexity as opposed to simplified counter dominant frames on single issues.

Caselet: Fight for $15 – Kansas City

The Fight for $15 campaign in Kansas City was more than a demand for better wages, it was a direct engagement with dominant narratives about labor, race, and worth. Central to the campaign was the disruption of a pervasive belief: that low-wage work is low-value work, done by people who failed to do better. This deeply entrenched story, racialized, moralized, and widely accepted, frames poverty as an individual failure and labor as unworthy unless credentialed.
In a region where low-wage work was often dismissed as "unskilled," fast-food workers, Black, white, Latino, came together to tell a different story: not just about policy, but about identity, solidarity, and what kind of future was possible.

Organized through Stand Up KC, workers publicly challenged the idea that poverty was a personal shortcoming. They held walkouts, testified at city council meetings, and shared stories that foregrounded care work, exhaustion, and interdependence. Their narratives didn't just highlight hardship, they surfaced moral clarity and collective aspiration.

One of the most powerful dynamics was how workers built trust and solidarity across racial lines, not by minimizing difference, but by locating shared values in their roles as caregivers, neighbors, and laborers. As one organizer put it, "We came in thinking we had different problems. We left understanding we were in the same story."

When Kansas City passed a $13 minimum wage in 2015, the Missouri legislature swiftly overruled it with a state preemption law. Rather than view this as defeat, the movement reframed it as narrative confirmation: proof that workers' voices were being silenced not just economically, but symbolically. The fight, they said, wasn't just for money, it was for recognition, representation, and the right to shape the narrative of work itself.

Lesson: This case reflects narrative engagement at multiple levels: it surfaced dominant logics around race, labor, and worth; facilitated new stories rooted in shared values; and positioned workers, not as victims, but as narrators of a more just and inclusive economy.

Explore the resources below to learn more.

- 10-Year Legacy of the Fight for $15 – National Employment Law Project
- Directed Network Campaigning in Action – Mobilisation Lab
- Fight for $15 Campaign Hub

2. Are we engaging enough with the dominant narratives that regulate meaning-making?

Narrative strategies operate within contexts shaped by entrenched dominant narratives. Examples include the global narrative of security, which reinforces norms around punishment, prisons, surveillance, and competition. Narrative strategies cannot avoid the dominant narratives through which people make meaning.

Caselet: Reframing Progress and Belonging — Standing Rock and "Water is Life"

This case highlights how expanding the emotional and cultural terrain can reframe dominant narratives without direct confrontation

At Standing Rock in 2016, Indigenous leaders and allies resisted the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline not simply through protest, but through a deep engagement with dominant narratives of development and security. In public discourse, pipelines were framed as symbols of economic progress, energy independence, and national security. Resistance to them was often painted as regressive or obstructionist and outside the boundaries of common-sense advancement.

Rather than confronting the dominant “progress” narrative directly, Standing Rock activists expanded the emotional and cultural terrain. They foregrounded a different logic: the sacredness of water, the relational belonging to land, and the protection of future generations. Through public storytelling, ceremonies, art, and the powerful “Water is Life” frame, they surfaced an alternative system of meaning rooted in indigenous moral logics in which care, responsibility, and collective stewardship outweighed short-term economic gains.

This engagement helped extend the meaning of the struggle beyond the immediate pipeline conflict. “Water is Life” became a symbol of broader environmental, Indigenous, and communal rights movements. It invited people across movements and geographies to reimagine the relationship between land, life, and economy and not simply to oppose extraction, but to reposition belonging and prosperity within a deeper relational narrative.

Lesson: While the Dakota Access Pipeline was ultimately completed, the cultural and emotional impact of Standing Rock helped reconfigure how people understood Indigenous sovereignty, environmental stewardship, and the meaning of progress itself.

Explore the resources below to learn more.

- Standing Rock Sioux and Dakota Access Pipeline - Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian
- Indigenous Storytelling at Standing Rock – Earth Island Journal
- 'We opened eyes': at Standing Rock, my fellow Native Americans make history – The Guardian

3. Narrative practitioners often seek to find "magic words" to convince people to think differently about an issue instead of operating at the level of mental models.

Dominant narratives often remain invisible, unarticulated and unaccounted for because they are deeply embedded in cultural assumptions. Are narrative strategies that depend on polling and seek the perfect words able to disrupt these dominant narratives, and are we engaging with underlying mental models with these well-tested words?

Caselet: Narrative Change for Marriage Equality

The pathway to marriage equality for same-sex couples included hundreds of court cases, culminating in the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in Obergefell v. Hodges. But Evan Wolfson, widely considered to be one of the architects of the movement, believes stories were another key metric of success.

His organization, Freedom to Marry, encouraged supporters to share stories of gay lives, couples raising children, caring for aging parents, navigating illness, and celebrating decades-long commitments. The aim wasn't to persuade through clever language, but to weave LGBTQ+ experiences into the public's shared moral frameworks. The shift wasn't engineered through polling, but through deepening public meaning systems of love, family, and belonging.

By the time of the 2015 ruling, public support for marriage equality had risen from 27% in the 1990s to 63%. Stories from straight family members, coworkers, and friends became an important part of the broader cultural shift. The message wasn't magic. The phrase "Love is love" drew on existing meanings of love, family, and belonging.

Lesson: Wolfson later reflected on a federal court ruling in Utah: "It's not the Constitution that has changed, but the knowledge of what it means to be gay or lesbian." The shift was cultural before it was institutional. The public wasn't asked to change their values, but to expand who those values could hold.

Explore the resources below to learn more.

- The Journey to Marriage Equality – Human Rights Campaign
- Love Is Love and Other Stories – Forge Organizing
- What We Can Learn from the Marriage Equality Campaign – Commons Library

- Why It Matters- Freedom to Marry

4. Embracing narrative complexity and uncertainty is at odds with strategic communication imperatives to keep messages simple so that they stick.

Simplistic, coherent narratives that presume certainty close off alternative perspectives. How do we then enrich our narrative strategies in a way that leaves an opening for multiple realities, and fosters broader support and adaptability across diverse audiences?

Caselet: Holding Narrative Complexity in the Disability Justice Movement

The disability justice movement, emerging in the early 2000s from the leadership of disabled queer and trans people of color, challenged dominant narratives that framed disability through simplistic lenses of tragedy, inspiration, or personal overcoming. Rather than collapsing complex experiences into easily digestible public stories, disability justice advocates expanded narratives that held multiple realities at once: pride and exclusion, autonomy and interdependence, rage and celebration.

Through storytelling, art, and lived practice, the movement surfaced systemic interconnections between ableism, racism, poverty, environmental injustice, and colonialism, refusing to flatten one identity or issue for the sake of strategic simplicity. Public-facing narratives such as "access intimacy," "crip wisdom," and "interdependent care" complicated dominant ideals of independence and success, inviting broader publics into a reimagining of dignity, relationship, and access.

Lesson: By embracing emotional and systemic complexity, the disability justice movement resisted the imperatives of traditional strategic communications to simplify or flatten their message. Instead, they built cultural and emotional infrastructures that made complexity visible and meaningful, positioning layered, intersectional realities as a source of strength rather than a barrier to belonging.

Explore the resources below to learn more.

- Disability Justice: A Working Framework – Project LETS
- Disability Justice Education Toolkit – UMass Amherst
- Disability Justice Resource List – Commons Library

Strategies for Disrupting Entrenched Narratives

Dominant narratives wield power not only because they are repeated, but because they often feel natural as they are embedded in cultural norms, emotional logics, and public expectations. They are reinforced through institutions, media, and policy, concentrating narrative power in ways that make them difficult to destabilize without addressing the systems that sustain them. **Disrupting them requires more than countering claims; it demands shifting the terrain on which meaning is made.**

This section explores strategies that surface cracks in dominant stories, redirect attention toward alternative frames, and expand the emotional and moral bandwidth of public discourse. These caselets reflect the delicate balance of exposing harmful frames without reinforcing them, and of planting new narrative seeds that can grow in unexpected places.

5. Can we find cracks in dominant narratives instead of trying to uproot them?

Breaking the simplicity of dominant stories allows space for alternative narratives. For example, stories exposing the cracks in the “American Dream” have opened new narrative possibilities without erasing its enduring appeal.

Caselet: The Cracks Beneath the American Dream

The American Dream has long promised a simple story: that through hard work and perseverance, anyone could build a better life. It has offered not just hope for personal advancement, but a shared moral horizon, connecting dignity to effort, perseverance to success. For generations, this narrative has fueled ambition, belonging, and resilience, helping hold a diverse society together.

Many individual stories bear witness to the power of the Dream. For countless people across backgrounds and generations, the Dream has been a real source of motivation, possibility, and pride. It continues to offer a powerful sense of agency and hope, even in the face of hardship. But the unexamined gaps beneath its promises have come at a cost. By framing success solely as a product of individual effort, the Dream has often masked systemic barriers, sidelined histories of exclusion, and blamed those left behind for conditions they did not create, thus making the appeal both sustaining and constraining.

Today, movements for racial justice, economic equity, and immigrant rights are challenging the old story. Rather than abandoning the Dream's core hopes of agency, dignity, and possibility, they are reshaping its meaning: lifting up narratives of collective thriving, interdependence, and shared responsibility. Success is being reimagined not as individual ascent alone, but as the strength and well-being of whole communities.

The American Dream persists because it speaks to a deep human longing. But its renewal depends on building stories that honor both the real aspirations it has fueled and the complexity of the conditions that shape who can achieve them, and how.

Lesson: Reimagining the Dream is not about abandoning aspiration, it's about making space for a fuller, truer story, where dignity and opportunity are not reserved for the few, but built for the many.

Explore the resources below to learn more.

- Before Greed: Americans Didn't Always Yearn for Riches- Boston Review
- Heather McGhee: Racism Has a Cost for Everyone – NPR's Fresh Air
- "What the American Dream Looks Like for Immigrants" – Vox

6. How can we avoid over-amplifying harmful narratives?

Focusing excessive attention on harmful narratives can reinforce and legitimize them. Redirecting attention toward alternative stories can help avoid giving harmful narratives further prominence, and yet organizers often get caught in a reactive loop of responding, playing on a narrative terrain not of their choosing.

Caselet: Choosing Not to Amplify—Dreamers and the Narrative of Belonging

In the early 2000s and 2010s, immigrant rights activists faced the widespread use of the term "illegal immigrant"—a framing that criminalized their existence and positioned them outside the moral boundaries of society in ways that still resonate today. Rather than reacting to accusations of 'illegality,' Dreamers redirected attention through proactive storytelling. They shared lived experiences of growing up in the US, of graduations, family life, and community service, emphasizing belonging rather than legal status.

This disciplined focus sought to prevent harmful frames from dominating public conversation. Instead of amplifying the "illegal" narrative by contesting it directly, Dreamers built a new emotional terrain centered on dignity, aspiration, and inclusion. Over time, these stories contributed to shifts in cultural understanding that repositioned undocumented youth not as outsiders, but as integral members of US communities.

Lesson: The Dreamers' strategy exemplifies how refusing to amplify harmful frames, and instead expanding alternative meaning systems, can remap public imagination and build long-term narrative power.

Explore the resources below to learn more.

- Dreamer Advocacy Resources – National Immigration Forum
- Narrative Strategy Basics for the Immigrant Movement – Race Forward
- Stories and Narratives: Higher Ed Portal – Presidents' Alliance

A Note on Shock-And-Awe Tactics:

Anti-democratic actors use shock-and-awe strategies to saturate attention and exhaust emotional energy. Instead of reacting to every provocation, can we create the containers for movement leaders to prioritize long-term goals and highlight these broader patterns?

Discussion

Some narratives don't emerge organically; they are engineered to provoke. Authoritarian actors often use emotional saturation and spectacle to flood public attention and collapse nuance. When movements respond to every provocation, the narrative terrain risks becoming fragmented, reactive, and emotionally depleted. Narrative engagement invites a different posture- one that resists the churn and helps publics locate patterns, stay grounded in long-term meaning, and sustain coherence across time. It's not about ignoring harm; it's about refusing to let the most provocative stories dictate the shape of public imagination.

7. Are we aware enough of the "boomerang effect" to avoid it?

Directly countering a narrative with simple messages or slogans risks reinforcing existing beliefs rather than shifting them. The strategic question is how people are expected to change their minds and whether the message may unintentionally feed oppositional narratives. Comprehensive narrative interventions that accompany bold slogans invite intended audiences to reflect on and create their own stories about an issue and can be more effective in changing perspectives.

Caselet: How "Defund" Mobilized and Provided Fuel to the Opposition

"Defund the Police" has mobilized a large base of supporters and catalyzed public discourse; and it also offers an opportunity to reflect on the potential risks of the "boomerang effect" (when your narrative strategy makes an oppositional dominant narrative grow stronger.) In the absence of shared lived experiences with those leading the Defund movement, and the media's tendency to amplify conflict, the oppositional narratives and dominant community safety frames were reinforced for many. The slogan offered a strong foil to push against because of such dominant security narratives, obscuring for many the alternate visions behind the movement.

This is not a critique of the slogan or movement but rather is raising the question of how we knowingly provoke and then prepare for the boomerang effect. The defund slogan has activated moral clarity and systemic critique for many movement actors. At the same time, for broader publics unfamiliar with abolitionist frameworks, it landed as a threat, inviting fear rather than curiosity. The narrative terrain around community safety continues to be contested beyond the slogan, and yet oppositional narratives frame "defund" as reckless and dangerous. Sympathetic audiences may struggle to connect the slogan to compelling alternative visions of community safety.

Lesson: This case highlights the tradeoffs we make when using provocative language that rallies a base while potentially narrowing the possibilities for narrative engagement with public meaning systems. It highlights the importance of deep narrative groundwork, of surfacing stories that reposition safety, care, and accountability. Bold slogans alone can run the risk of being redefined by those who oppose them or don't fully understand them. The absence of inviting broader publics into envisioning new systems allows opponents to fix the narrative around "defund," turning a systemic critique into a perceived threat, and exposing the limits of countering without narrative engagement.

Explore the resource below to learn more.

- "How to Pay Attention: Tricks for Parsing Trump's Noise**"** – Protect Democracy
- "Was 'Defund the Police' Crazy?" – The New Yorker

8. Humor, when used strategically, can disrupt entrenched narratives by exposing their contradictions and absurdities. But it requires care: mockery and simplification can provoke backlash or entrench the very narratives one seeks to challenge.

Caselet: Preaching Against the Shopocalypse- Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping

Sometimes disruption doesn't come through critique, but by using the dominant form itself. That's what makes Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping so effective. They don't just protest consumerism or corporate power, they perform it, drawing on the familiar rhythms of American evangelicalism to expose what often goes unnoticed.

Their public actions take the shape of revivals: sermons, robes, choirs, shouts of hallelujah. But instead of salvation, they preach resistance to what they call the "Shopocalypse." In one action during the financial crisis, they held an exorcism inside a Chase Bank, calling on the spirits of greed to leave the space. It was funny, but also carried moral weight. Even people who didn't fully agree stopped to watch.

This isn't humor meant to humiliate. It is humor used to interrupt. By drawing on recognizable forms, they create just enough disorientation for people to see something differently. Their performances don't tell people what to believe, they create moments where the dominant story feels off, shaky, unfamiliar. It's a disruption of tone as much as message.

Lesson: Reverend Billy doesn't offer a new coherent narrative. But by turning the familiar upside down, he creates space for people to reflect on the one they're already in.

Explore the resources below to learn more.

- JP Morgan Chase toad protest- The Guardian
- Reverend Billy takes aim at climate change- NPR Profile
- Credit Card Exorcism at Starbucks- YouTube

Strategies for Relational Narrative Engagement

Narratives don't just reflect what people believe, they shape how people are positioned in relation to one another. Dominant narratives often harden those positions, casting individuals and groups as threats, victims, heroes, or villains. In doing so, they erode the narrative infrastructure needed for shared meaning-making, collective action, and relational repair.

This section explores how counter-narrative strategies can avoid reinforcing these binary positions and instead cultivate systemic, relational openings. These caselets examine what becomes possible when narrative work resists moral closure, sustains emotional complexity, and builds the conditions for publics to stay in relationship, even across difference.

9. What is the impact of framing our work in win-lose terms and positioning it as a narrative battle?

Framing strategies around "winning" and "losing" narratives reinforces binaries and can fuel toxic polarization. Another option is to foster narratives that emphasize collective responsibility and shared struggles.

9a. Caselet: Narrative Battle Framing in School Curricula Conflicts

Public debates over school curricula, including how race, gender, and American history are taught, have increasingly been framed as existential narrative battles. Advocacy groups and political campaigns popularized the "parents' rights" frame, portraying curricular decisions as part of a struggle against "woke indoctrination." Defenders of inclusive education often responded with their own battle language, framing the fight as a defense of truth, justice, and democracy.

While shaped by national campaigns, these battle narratives take root locally. They are relationally reinforced through local school board meetings, PTA discussions, neighborhood organizing groups, and community Facebook networks, where emotional stakes around identity, control, and belonging are activated and amplified.

This "battle of the narratives" framing hardened emotional publics, collapsing complex realities into binary oppositions: parental control versus progressive overreach, freedom versus oppression. Emotional closure and moral certainty dominate, shrinking the space for shared inquiry and complex conversation.

Relational and systemic alternatives existed at the local level. Some coalitions of parents, educators, and students reframed education around community belonging, critical inquiry, and the collective flourishing of young people. However, these alternative narratives struggled for amplification. When narrative change efforts themselves leaned into battle framings, they were often absorbed into the broader gridlocked emotional terrain, reducing their ability to invite adaptive, relational public meaning-making.

Lesson: The school curricula conflicts illustrate how battle framing narrows the public imagination around education—not only reinforcing toxic polarization but also making it harder to cultivate shared inquiry about the future of public life. Sustaining systemic, relational narratives in education requires deliberate resistance to emotional closure, and a broader commitment to reimagining education as a space of collective belonging and democratic possibility.

Explore the resources below to learn more.

- EXPLAINER: The history behind 'parents' rights' in schools- Associated Press
- Can School Boards Survive the "Parents' Rights" Movement? Teachers College, Columbia University
- 'Parents' rights': Republicans wage education culture war as 2024 looms- The Guardian

9b. Caselet: Win-Lose and Zero-Sum Framing in Student Debt Cancellation Narratives

Public discourse around student debt cancellation often merged zero-sum economic logic with emotional win-lose framing. Narratives framed debt relief as a contest between indebted students and hardworking taxpayers, suggesting that any forgiveness for one group would necessarily harm another. Publics were invited into moralized competition framed by ideas around fairness, narrowing the imagination of what collective economic justice could look like.

These narratives were not confined to political debates; they circulated relationally through family conversations, workplace discussions, local media outlets, and everyday economic resentments, anchoring zero-sum logics into personal and communal understandings of fairness and responsibility.

Systemic and relational alternatives did exist. Organizations like the Debt Collective and progressive think tanks framed student debt cancellation as part of broader structural repair: restoring the public purpose of education, addressing racial wealth gaps, and challenging the commodification of opportunity. These narratives emphasized belonging, care, and systemic reimagination rather than simple competition.

However, when narrative change efforts themselves adopted win/lose or zero-sum framings, describing debt cancellation primarily as a victory over adversaries, they were drawn into the same gridlocked emotional terrain as dominant public narratives. Amplification dynamics favored simplified framings, making systemic relational work harder to sustain at scale.

The student debt conversation illustrates how zero-sum and win-lose framings foreclose broader solidarity—recasting systemic repair as personal competition. Expanding

relational, systemic narrative strategies remains essential to reimagining economic justice not as a contest of deservingness, but as a collective investment in shared futures.

Explore the resources below to learn more.

- "Democrats, Republicans, and Zero-Sum Thinking"- Harvard Magazine
- "Student Loans, the Racial Wealth Divide, and Why We Need Full Student Debt Cancellation" – Brookings Institution
- "Progress for People of Color Doesn't Come at White Folks' Expense"- Boston Review

Discussion

Across different domains, from education to economic justice, narrative battle framing and win-lose logics narrow public meaning-making, collapse relational possibilities, and deepen toxic polarization. While systemic and relational alternatives persist, they often struggle against amplification dynamics that favor emotional closure and binary oppositions. When narrative change efforts themselves adopt these adversarial frames, they risk being absorbed into the same gridlocked terrain they seek to transform. Sustaining systemic, relational narratives across movements and issues requires resisting the pull of emotional closure—and committing to the slower, deeper work of cultivating adaptive public meaning-making over time.

10. Facts alone rarely persuade, and narratives must connect emotionally, yet have we found the right narrative container to explore those emotions?

Caselet: Using Emotional Framing to Ground Science

For years, dominant narratives about the climate crisis were shaped by scientific experts, conveyed through technical data and abstract risk models. When public inaction persisted, these efforts gave way to more emotionally charged warnings: global catastrophe, mass extinction, flooded cities. The new "climate doom" narrative aimed to shock, but it often backfired. Instead of mobilizing action, it left many people feeling paralyzed, helpless, or skeptical.
A shift began when frontline communities, especially Indigenous leaders, island nations, and youth movements, began telling different stories. These weren't narratives of neutrality or despair. They were stories of stewardship, rootedness, and collective possibility. Activists reframed the climate crisis not just as a scientific emergency, but as a moral and cultural reckoning. They highlighted the injustice of who bears the brunt of climate impacts, and invited others into shared responsibility for the planet.

This shift wasn't just about messaging, it was about narrative repositioning. Scientists were no longer the sole narrators and those most affected became central storytellers. These stories introduced themes of agency, care, and shared responsibility into a public conversation dominated by fear and helplessness. The dominant narrative of helplessness began to crack open, making space for a new story: that people, especially young people, Indigenous nations, and

global South communities, could lead, organize, and imagine alternatives. Rather than reacting to misinformation with more data, these movements reframed the emotional terrain entirely.

Lesson: This narrative engagement didn't rely on denying crisis, it reframed it through belonging and agency, positioning publics as part of the solution, not just witnesses to collapse.

Explore the resources below to learn more.

- Climate-Doom-to-Messy-Hope Handbook – UBC Climate Hub
- Changing the Narrative Around a Changing Climate – University of Michigan
- Best Remedies for 'Climate Doom' – Climate Positive Now

11. How can we best elevate delegitimized stories that can be truly heard and explored together?

Caselet: Restoring Visibility and Legitimacy in the AIDS Crisis

The AIDS crisis of the 1980s was not only a public health emergency—it was a crisis made deadlier by the narratives surrounding it. Dominant cultural logics cast homosexuality as deviant and immoral, rendering the people most affected invisible, and excluded from care and concern. This narrative framing didn't just silence individuals, it shaped public inaction, delayed research, and blocked compassionate response. Hundreds of thousands of young men died, some unable to speak the truth of their illness, because the stories available to them, and about them, were rooted in shame and blame.

In response, communities launched a wave of narrative resistance. Through film, theater, mass media, and the embodied protest of ACT UP and its allies, they reclaimed visibility for lives long hidden. These acts of storytelling allowed the public to feel the heartache, injustice, courage, and transformation embedded in the fight for recognition, treatment, and dignity.

These weren't just stories to inform or elicit sympathy. They disrupted the dominant moral frame, repositioning AIDS from a symbol of deviance to a crisis born of stigma, neglect, and systemic exclusion.

Through sustained narrative engagement, communities reclaimed narrative power, restoring both social and political recognition for a community long marginalized. By centering emotional truth and collective grief, these stories expanded public imagination about care, responsibility, and who gets to be seen as fully human.

The legacy of this narrative shift continues today, informing how public health, queer identity, and collective mourning are represented in media, policy, and culture. Films, memoirs, and public commemorations have sustained this visibility—but the risk of forgetting remains. As new health crises emerge and LGBTQ+ rights face renewed backlash, the narrative lessons of the AIDS era remind us that whose stories are told, and how, can mean the difference between abandonment and action.

Explore the resources below to learn more.

- "How AIDS Activists Used 'Die-Ins' to Demand Attention"- History.com
- ACT UP Oral History Project – ACT UP

12. Villains make for good storytelling, but do they undermine our long-term goals?

Caselet: Refusing the Fight—Cross-Partisan COVID Collaboration in Local Government

During the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the national narrative quickly split into warring camps. Public health became politicized, and masks, lockdowns, and vaccines turned into symbols of partisan identity. Across the country, local officials faced mounting pressure, not just to govern, but to perform allegiance. In many places, Republican leaders were expected to mock mandates, while Democratic leaders were expected to condemn their counterparts as reckless or cruel.

But in places like Kent County, Michigan and Missoula, Montana, something else happened. Republican mayors stood beside Democratic public health officials at town halls and local school board members crossed party lines to release joint statements about reopening plans. These moments weren't free of tension or disagreement, but they consciously refused the dominant script that cast the "other side" as villains.

In one widely attended community forum, a conservative mayor openly acknowledged how hard the restrictions were and then pivoted to affirm the health department's data and decisions. His Democratic counterpart responded in a similar spirit, emphasizing their shared responsibility to keep people safe rather than treating the response as a partisan contest. Together, they made narrative space for complexity, grief, and collective care.

Lesson: While these collaborations didn't go viral, they helped preserve legitimacy at the local level where trust still existed. And they offer a powerful reminder that disrupting villain stories isn't just a messaging choice; it's a relational risk, a strategic posture, and in some cases, an act of courage.

Explore the resources below to learn more.

- Kent and Ottawa County Mask Orders- GovDelivery
- Missoula Country Indoor Mask Rule- Montana Public Radio
- On the Frontlines of Today's Cities: Trauma, Challenges, and Solutions- National League of Cities
- Preparing for the Next Pandemic: Early Lessons from COVID-19- Brookings Institute

13. Emotions are complex; anger and outrage are strong mobilizing forces but also might reinforce fear and entrenched overly simplified identities.

Caselet: Emotional Terrain and the Symbolism of Kaepernick's Protest

In 2016, NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick knelt during the national anthem to protest police brutality and systemic racism. His quiet act of dissent captured national attention, tapping into longstanding tensions between dominant narratives of patriotism and marginalized narratives of racial justice. What followed was not a single public reaction, but a polarized surge of interpretation that quickly hardened into competing symbols.

For many, the protest gave voice to collective grief and anger, channeling long-standing frustrations into a visible demand for change. Yet rather than prompting a sustained reckoning with police violence, the public narrative quickly shifted. Kneeling was reframed by opponents as a rejection of American values, turning the act into a symbolic referendum on loyalty and national identity. The complexity of the original protest was eclipsed by a binary: to kneel or to stand.

In the absence of a more adaptive narrative infrastructure that could hold grief, belonging, strategy, and solidarity, anger took center stage, which was justified and also narrowing. This galvanized some audiences but may have also made it harder to reach those who might have supported reform but felt destabilized by what the protest came to symbolize. Narrative evolution does not mean abandoning anger; it means expanding the story so that anger sits alongside moral vision, historical context, and an invitation to shared responsibility. Without that expansion, righteous anger, however justified, can reinforce dominant grooves, limiting a movement's reach.

The kneeling protests succeeded in elevating racial injustice into public consciousness, but they also revealed how easily powerful acts of dissent can be symbolically hijacked and absorbed into polarized frames. Efforts were made to frame the protest within a longer struggle for justice, honoring the grief behind it, and connecting it to broader civic values like patriotism and belonging. Yet, those stories lacked the narrative infrastructure needed to carry their complexity across a divided public. Without a framework that could hold multiple emotional truths, historical context, and visions for change, the protest's symbolism narrowed, and opportunities for broader engagement were lost.

Lesson: This case shows how powerful dissent can be reshaped by dominant frames, but also how movements can strengthen their impact by building narrative strategies that carry complexity forward. When anger, grief, belonging, and vision are held together, the story doesn't soften, it expands.

Explore the resources below to learn more.

- Understanding #TakeaKnee and Athlete Activism – Facing History
- Owning the Narrative Around Anthem Protests – Pop Culture Collaborative
- Timeline of Student Protests – NCAC

14. It's hard to avoid delegitimizing/alienating language, even toward opponents.

Caselet: Narrative Collisions in Climate Justice and Working-Class Legitimacy

In environmental justice organizing, tensions have often emerged around how to narrate fossil fuel workers' roles in systems of extraction and ecological harm. National environmental groups, local activists, and online climate advocates sometimes slipped into language that painted fossil fuel workers not as people caught inside harmful systems, but as the enemy themselves. In rallies, social media posts, and campaign slogans, workers were sometimes framed as ignorant, greedy, or part of the problem—no different from oil executives.

This kind of storytelling, often shaped by grief and urgency, sometimes blurred crucial distinctions between workers surviving within harmful systems and the corporations profiting from them. Faced with the enormity of ecological collapse, it can feel emotionally clarifying to name villains. But in doing so, climate narratives have at times simplified the terrain by casting fossil fuel workers not as people navigating constrained choices, but as active agents of harm.

That collapse of nuance, while understandable, made it harder to hold onto the deeper truth: many of those workers are also caught in the very systems climate movements seek to transform. Framing workers as villains can harden identity defensiveness, especially in communities already feeling economically and culturally sidelined. It can close down possibilities for dialogue about just transitions, not because the values aren't shared, but because the framing makes shared reimagining feel out of reach.

Lesson: This example underscores a deeper challenge in narrative work: even when driven by legitimate anger and moral clarity, it's easy to slip into storytelling that reinforces binaries. Delegitimizing language may feel satisfying in the moment, but it often shrinks the space for coalition-building and long-term transformation. Effective narrative engagement doesn't require letting go of grief, urgency, or critique, it asks us to channel those emotions into stories that illuminate systems without collapsing people.

Explore the resources below to learn more.

- Case Study: Narrative Change in the Climate Justice Movement- FrameWorks Institute
- Winning Fossil Fuel Workers Over to a Just Transition- Jacobin
- The Common Ground Between Labor and Climate Justice- Environmental Health News

Caselet 15: The Narrative Afterlife of the Civil Rights Movement

Capstone Case: This case differs from others in this set. Rather than contrasting short-term vs. long-term strategy, it reveals what happens even after long-term narrative shifts take hold. It highlights the fragility of meaning over time and the need to revisit, re-tell, and re-anchor powerful stories across generations.

The Civil Rights Movement is often remembered as a moral triumph, but at the time, its dominant public framing told a different story. In white mainstream media and political discourse, civil rights protesters were frequently portrayed as agitators or threats to order. The prevailing narrative framed the U.S. as a fundamentally fair society, marred only by isolated injustices, not systemic racism. To resist civil rights, many white Americans didn't have to see themselves as hateful. They simply had to believe the stories they had been taught: that desegregation was destabilizing, that protest was unpatriotic, and that things were already getting better.

These narratives were powerful not because they were overtly extreme, but because they made complicity feel reasonable, even virtuous. As Dr. Jenice L. View writes, the movement was "strategic brilliance, logistical messiness, exalted joy, heart-gouging sorrow," led by ordinary people whose stories often went untold at the time. Only later would figures like Martin Luther King Jr. be remembered as heroes—after their radical critiques were softened, and their stories retrofitted to fit a more comfortable national mythology.

But the dominant story didn't simply collapse on its own. Movement actors worked deliberately to fracture it. One of the clearest strategies was exposing the gap between America's stated values and its daily practices, especially for a national audience. The brutality inflicted on peaceful protesters in Birmingham, Selma, and elsewhere wasn't accidental; it was expected. Activists knew the visual contradiction of nonviolent Black children attacked by police dogs and fire hoses would destabilize the idea that America was already just. The shock was strategic. It wasn't meant to provoke sympathy alone, it was meant to create dissonance for people who thought things were basically fine.

This strategy wasn't just reactive. It was layered. Young activists framed their actions within moral and constitutional language. Churches didn't just offer logistical support, they framed the movement in religious terms that appealed to both Black and white communities. When sit-ins disrupted daily life, they weren't only tactical interruptions, they created visual and emotional cracks in the story of peaceful American order. These moments exposed the limits of the dominant frame. But exposure alone wasn't enough.

The movement also built its own narrative infrastructure, layered, relational, and intentionally public. Freedom schools didn't just teach literacy, they taught students how to locate themselves inside a different telling of the South. SNCC organizers crafted public statements that emphasized solidarity and moral clarity without simplifying the stakes. The Highlander Folk School trained leaders not only to mobilize, but to speak and reframe. Choirs, mass meetings, and call-and-response sermons weren't background noise, they were how people metabolized new meaning together. Movement media such as newsletters, pamphlets, and oral histories

offered shared language and stories that helped people hold complexity without freezing or fleeing.

In these ways, the Civil Rights Movement didn't just resist a dominant narrative, it offered people a new place to stand, emotionally and politically. That work made long-term shifts possible. But like any living narrative structure, it requires care. Without revisiting and retelling, even the most powerful stories can be softened, reframed, or turned into something they were never meant to be.

But even cultural shifts as wide-reaching as those of the Civil Rights Movement are not immune to revision or backlash. Today, explicit white nationalism is once again on the rise, with 165 active hate groups recorded by the Southern Poverty Law Center in 2023. Meanwhile, the narrative legacy of the Civil Rights Movement is under renewed attack—from book bans to ahistorical curriculum laws that attempt to strip the movement of its systemic critique. These developments don't just threaten history, they threaten the public's ability to understand injustice in the present.

Lesson: This case stands apart from others in this collection: it doesn't illustrate a short-term narrative misstep. Instead, it shows that even the most influential cultural shifts must be revisited and re-articulated over time. The narrative groundwork laid by the Civil Rights Movement created new ways of understanding justice, solidarity, and democratic belonging, but that groundwork is not fixed. It must be returned to, reinterpreted, and made resonant again in new contexts. This case doesn't offer resolution. Instead, it invites us to consider what it takes to keep meaning alive, even after the world has changed.

Explore the resources below to learn more.

- Putting the Movement Back Into Civil Rights Teaching, Introduction- Jenice L. View
- The Role of the Black Church in the Civil Rights Movement- AFROAM
- Communications Department- SNCC Digital Gateway
- A Better Way to Teach the Civil Rights Movement- Edutopia
- Freedom's Struggle and Freedom Schools- Charles Cobb Jr., Monthly Review

Conclusion: What These Cases Reveal

Taken together, these caselets reveal the many tensions that surface when countering dominant narratives, especially in an age of disinformation, toxic polarization, and authoritarian drift. They show how easily our well-intentioned strategies can reproduce the very dynamics we seek to disrupt: flattening difference, reinforcing binaries, over-amplifying harmful frames, or collapsing relational possibilities into win-lose logic.

The most effective interventions go beyond rejecting dominant stories or offering better messages. Instead, they work at the level of meaning systems, revealing how stories operate emotionally, culturally, and systemically. They attend to what's recognizable as legitimate, what's risky to say, and how publics are positioned to hear.

Many of these examples show that emotional resonance must be matched by narrative evolution, or movements risk hardening divides. That amplification requires discernment because what gets centered, and how, matters. Holding strategic clarity and narrative complexity together is not easy—but it's essential for transformation that goes beyond the surface. Villains can mobilize, but they can also foreclose relational transformation. Relational, systemic framings create openings not by softening conflict, but by legitimizing more people's place inside it.

Across these cases, narrative power operates not just through stories themselves, but through the systems that authorize some meanings while marginalizing others. Ultimately, countering through narrative engagement means disrupting the entrenched narrative grooves that have shaped public discourse over time and reward simplicity, flatten difference, and resist complexity. It asks us to build narrative ecosystems that can hold complexity, invite emergence, and sustain new patterns of meaning: spaces where stories don't just push back against dominant narratives but expand who and what is seen as legitimate within the public imagination.

This document is intended not only as analysis, but as a resource for workshops, coalition strategy sessions, or reflection spaces across different contexts. We invite readers to adapt and extend these tensions and caselets in ways that meet the needs of their work.