

The Power of Public Narratives

Narratives Help Us Make Sense of the World

“Humans, as pattern-seeking social creatures, assemble collections of mutually-reinforcing stories, in turn establishing shared common sense and constructing stereotypes about people and places, communities and cultures, ideologies and institutions. These core narratives, fundamental to our understanding the world and to our ability to navigate through it, nurture feelings of belonging and marginalisation ... narratives often determine who deserves our solidarity or our scorn, our compassion or our contempt, our fear or fealty.”¹

World views are made up of the beliefs, values, and assumptions about the world that each of us carry. They are shaped by our upbringing, cultures, and experiences. Narratives are the way we draw on our worldview to make meaning of the world around us – they shape how we understand what is happening and why, what is right and wrong, who and what matters.

Our worldviews and narratives carry many ideas from the dominant culture that legitimise and normalise discrimination, inequality, violence, and differences in power. Yet, they can also be a source of ideas and values that are liberating, compassionate, and transformative.

Public Narratives are Part of the Crackdown on Civic Space and Violent Attacks on HRDs

“Worldviews and narratives are an arena of power. We choose to participate or we cede power. We ignore longer-term narrative shifts at our own peril, both because it allows the dominant ones to remain unchallenged, and because we risk unintentionally reinforcing dominant power narratives.”²

Narratives are always contested between those that seek to preserve the status quo and those that seek to change it. Yet today, narratives have become a weapon for closing civic space. State and non-state perpetrators of violence and restrictions are crafting and mobilising public narratives as a core strategy. They use stigmatisation and smear attacks to discredit and isolate activists and movements. They manipulate news, public opinion, and beliefs and fears to legitimise repressive actions and divide and undermine civil society. They spread negative narratives that portray activists as anti-national, anti-development, undermining societal norms, elitist, unaccountable and corrupt, and even as terrorists.

“How issues are framed and communicated illustrates the way power operates, sometimes overtly and often behind the scenes, to exclude issues. For example, feminism is deemed elitist or a western import that destroys families. Framing the situation in this manner deflects attention from the economic realities that break families apart... many political leaders frame policy decisions as security interests, manipulating fear and anxiety to justify war and reduce civil liberties while obscuring the economic interests.”³

These narratives and their framing foster and exploit existing prejudice to generate fear, call into question whose rights and voices count, justify legal restrictions and repression, and to create conditions for violent attacks and impunity: *“This trend in political framing is not new, but many activists experience closing civil society space as being driven, at least in part, by an increase in state-sponsored rhetoric that prescribes and enforces narrow patriarchal and*

¹ The Narrative Initiative, ‘*Toward New Gravity: Charting a Course for the Narrative Initiative*’ (2017).

² Dave Mann, Grassroots Policy Project.

³ JASS, ‘*Making Change Happen 3: Power*’, (2006).

heteronormative gendered behaviour and sexual identity, and which is maintained through violence, threats and stigma.”⁴

Civil Society and Activists Need Both Stronger Narrative Analysis and Narrative Change Strategies

“The number one job of those invested in the status quo is to divide us.”⁵

Recent research in India, Indonesia, Kenya, and Mexico suggests that public attitudes to human rights organisations remain largely positive.⁶ However, for many activists and members of civil society targeted by slander and smear campaigns, this is not their daily reality: *“If you throw enough mud it sticks, of course.”⁷* Worried about public opinion turning hostile, civil society groups globally are searching for new and more effective responses to negative narratives, as well as ways to promote social justice and human rights agendas. Their efforts include cognitive- and social science-based research, values-based messaging and communications campaigns, the use of algorithms to drive social media, storytelling for movements, and creative and cultural engagement.⁸ While there are signs that narrative change work on human rights issues is gaining traction, at least in the US and UK⁹, less evidence exists in the Global South.

Building strong popular support for civil society and activist movements that can withstand delegitimising narratives, however, is long-term work and requires more than smart and well-framed communications campaigns. Civil society groups need a clearer analysis of the narrative strategies used against their work – particularly what makes it effective – and our own contrasting and compelling narratives.

Narratives Build Power for Transformative Social Change When They Connect People to Progressive Values and Movements.

“Defining a ‘we’ is critical to our power – I am not alone. I am with you because we are more together. Our connection is deeper than an issue.”¹⁰

As civil society groups and movements seek to shape progressive narratives, the temptation is to frame them as ‘counter’ or ‘alternative’ narratives, which risks validating the dominance of those we want to change. Offering the choice of a contrasting narrative, which appeals to the progressive values within people’s belief systems and worldviews, can incline them towards the value and contributions of civic activism.

Activating these values is the deeper work of popular and political education and of movement-building, which build a sense of collective identity and analysis rooted in shared worldview. A first step towards creating narratives that build *power with* and *power for* transformative change is to use narrative analysis tools to unmask the narratives used to marginalise and foster hate and violence, and the actors behind them.¹¹

From there, groups can take up a variety of tools and methods to surface the values and beliefs that drive our work and agendas, to reveal and elevate other narratives, and to define ways of communicating those both in what we say and what we do. Our narratives must connect with the public about why they should care about civic participation and activism, social movements, and human rights in a general way, but more importantly, what we all have at stake in their vitality and protection. In this way, over time, narratives become part of a strategy for collective power, transformative change, and protection that mitigates or prevents division and vulnerability to attack.

⁴ Mama Cash & Urgent Action Fund, *‘Standing Firm: Women- and Trans-Led Organisations Respond to Closing Space for Civil Society’* (2017).

⁵ Dave Mann, Grassroots Policy Project.

⁶ Pew Research Center, *‘Public Attitudes to Human Rights Organisations: The Case of India, Indonesia, Kenya and Mexico’*, Pew Global Attitudes Survey 2017.

⁷ Yehuda Shaul, Breaking the Silence, Israel quoted in article *“It’s being done to intimidate us”: Israeli anti-occupation groups face crackdown’*, The Guardian, 24 October 2017.

⁸ The Narrative Initiative, *ibid*.

⁹ See for example the work of the Center for Story-Based Strategy and Frameworks Institute (US), and, Common Cause and Equally Ours (UK).

¹⁰ Dave Mann, Grassroots Policy Project.

¹¹ Center for Story-Based Strategy.