

TACTIC

STORYTELLING

Storytelling is far more than telling a tale; it's a way of organizing reality — and political power. A good story can build group solidarity, develop a shared analysis of a social problem, and up participation.

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“STORYTELLING IS NOT JUST A FORM OF PUBLICITY, BUT A MEANS OF ORGANIZING.”

“The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you alter, even by a millimetre, the way . . . people look at reality, then you can change it.”

—James Baldwin

In the last few hours you've probably heard, told, or thought of several dozen stories: a news report, a love song, an online video, a daydream, a piece of gossip among friends. Stories are a fundamental aspect of human consciousness: Through their insights into cause and effect, they are how we make sense of the world around us, and we can tap into that power in our efforts to make social change (see: PRINCIPLE: Think narratively).

In order to bring about social change, people must come together to recognize shared challenges, figure out solutions to those challenges, identify allies and enemies, and build the relationships needed to apply pressure and win. All of that happens in no small part through stories.

Seen in this light, storytelling is not just a form of publicity, but also a means of organizing. Storytelling is never just a top-down transmission of ideas to a passive audience; at its best, storytelling goes in all directions. People respond to your stories; they may contest them or mash them up; they share their own stories in response; or pass your stories on in their own words.

Popular storytelling of this sort changes the storytellers just as much as it changes the audience. When people share their personal stories on a social issue, they become more invested in that issue because it is now theirs.

POTENTIAL RISKS

Storytelling can be fun and creative, but don't get seduced into thinking you're making change when you're just satisfying your own creative impulses. Storytelling, for all its transformative power, also appeals to our narcissistic obsession with technology and media: You make a video, put it online, and get some views and comments. What's not to love? Besides, it seems so much easier to “change the story” than to “change the world.” It's not. Changing the world through stories is as hard as by any other means, and it requires us being generous, courageous, and shrewd with our stories, as well as willing to leave behind stories that no longer serve us, recognize when our stories no longer fit who we are, and write new stories capable of pulling us into our ideal future.

RELATED TOOLS

Consider a few uses of popular storytelling:

To learn: GlobalGiving collected narratives from partner communities in Africa as a way of evaluating the needs and strengths of those communities. Those stories influenced GlobalGiving's direction, and the youth they hired to collect stories got more involved in their communities.

To organize: When 2008 Obama campaign volunteers told stories of "self, us and now" to each other, they learned how to speak with voters in personal terms about the issues of the day, and build an ever-growing base of supporters. Now, community groups worldwide use the Public Narrative method developed by organizer and educator Marshall Ganz.

To educate: In the It Gets Better Project, responding to tragically high rates of suicide among LGBTQ youth, tens of thousands of LGBTQ adults and their allies told their personal stories as a way of encouraging LGBTQ young people to stay alive long enough to get to the good stuff. The project reached youth directly, got adults personally involved in suicide prevention, and raised money for a much-needed hotline.

To advocate: Sex workers in South Africa, intellectually disabled people in Moldova, and other groups funded by the OSF Health Media Initiative have told their stories through videos, publications, and other media to persuade policymakers to recognize their rights. People most directly affected became the protagonists of their own stories, rather than being relegated to the status of secondary characters while their helpers or advocates took top billing. The same is true for prisoner families and former prisoners sharing their stories on the Nation Inside platform, as part of the movement to end mass incarceration. For example, the Campaign for Prison Phone Justice, hosted on the Nation Inside platform, used stories as part of a successful effort to pressure the Federal Communications Commission to regulate the exorbitant cost of phone calls from US correctional facilities.

In all these instances, storytelling is a creative endeavor. Every time we tell a story, we create something. In the process of articulating what we can and want to accomplish together, we discover ourselves and each other. When we tell stories about our attempts to correct injustice, we stay hopeful and strong. Telling stories is not just the way we talk about our challenges, it is one of the vital means we have for meeting those challenges.

LEARN MORE

Re-Imagining Change: How to Use Story-Based Strategy to Win Campaigns, Build Movements, and Change the World
Doyle Canning and Patrick Reinsborough, 2017, 2nd Edition
<https://pmpress.org.uk/product/reimagining-change-how-to-use-story-based->

Stories

- Angola 15+2
- Citizens' Posse
- Ghana ThinkTank
- Harry Potter Alliance
- Modern-Day Slavery Museum
- #ThisFlag
- Trail of Dreams

Tactics

- Cultural disobedience
- Forum theatre
- Hashtag campaign
- Image theatre
- Legislative theatre
- Music video

Principles

- Brand or be branded
- Consider your audience
- Expose inequality with a viral gesture
- Lead with sympathetic characters
- Reframe the issue
- Seek common ground
- Think narratively

Theories

- Action logic
- Framing
- Memes
- New Pan-Afrikanism
- Prefigurative politics
- Theatre of the Oppressed

Methodologies

- Battle of the story
- Hardship to grievance
- Story of self, us, and now

TAGS

Communications, Community building

strategy-to-win-campaigns-build-movements-and-change-the-world/

Storytelling and Social Change: A Strategy Guide

Working Narratives

<http://workingnarratives.org/story-guide/>

Vision, Values and Voice: A Social Justice Communications Toolkit

The Opportunity Agenda

<http://toolkit.opportunityagenda.org/>

Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy

Stephen Duncombe, 2007

http://www.stephenduncombe.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Dream_final.pdf