

PRINCIPLE THINK NARRATIVELY

Sometimes the best response to a powerful enemy is a powerful story.

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“EVERY STORY IS BUILT ON UNSTATED ASSUMPTIONS.”

As much as we'd like to believe that human beings are rational actors who make decisions based on a sober weighing of the facts, cognitive science reminds us that we are narrative animals who apprehend the world through stories. We make decisions more with our guts than our heads, and the facts alone are seldom enough to move public opinion. Therefore, social actors are constantly waging a “battle of the story” to shape public perception.

The unequal nature of our media and communications systems (see: THEORY: The propaganda model) means that moneyed interests will always have more access to the airwaves — but that doesn't mean their story will be more creative or compelling. We can make up some of that difference, not just by becoming master storytellers, but by *thinking* narratively. By paying attention to how story and power are always interwoven, we can better understand how political power operates, and also how we can contest it.

Thinking narratively means we're also strategizing narratively and listening narratively. When designing our actions and campaigns, we need to step outside our own perspective to analyze how the issue is perceived by others who don't share our assumptions. (Remember, people respond to a story not so much because it is true, but because they find it meaningful.) We need to consider our audience, and build our campaign narrative out of the core building blocks that make for a good story.

Here are five to keep in mind:

Conflict

RELATED TOOLS

Stories

- Battle in Seattle
- Billionaires for Bush
- Citizens' Posse
- Conflict Kitchen
- Daycare Centre Sit-In
- Harry Potter Alliance
- Pimp My . . . Carroça!
- Stripping Power in Uganda
- The Salt March
- Trail of Dreams
- Who Would Accept?
- Whose Tea Party?
- “You'll never have a home in your f***ing life!”

Tactics

- Creative disruption
- Culture jamming
- Guerrilla projection
- Hashtag campaign
- Hoax
- Inflatables
- Media-jacking
- Music video

What is the problem or conflict being addressed? How is it framed, and what does that frame leave out?

Characters

This can be a profound organizing question: Who are “we”? Who are the other characters in the story? Do the characters speak for themselves or is someone speaking on their behalf (see: PRINCIPLE: Lead with sympathetic characters)?

Imagery

What powerful images can help convey the story? Is there a metaphor or analogy that could describe the issue? A good story uses imagery and evocative language to show us what’s at stake rather than tell the audience what to think (see: PRINCIPLE: Show, don’t tell).

Foreshadowing

What is our vision of resolution to the conflict? What is our solution to the problem? How do we evoke that desired resolution without, as it were, giving the ending away? (see: THEORY: Prefigurative politics).

Assumptions

Every story is built on unstated assumptions. Sometimes the best way to challenge a competing story is to expose and challenge its unstated assumptions (see: PRINCIPLE: Make the invisible visible).

These five elements of story can be used together to construct a narrative of change. Fleshing out these elements as we plan out our campaigns can also give us insights into strategic opportunities for action or intervention.

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LEARN MORE

Battle of the Story Worksheet

smartMeme.org

https://collectiveliberation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/SmartMeme_Battle_of_the_Story_Worksheet.pdf

Intro to Story-based Strategy

Center for Story-based Strategy

<https://www.storybasedstrategy.org/intro-to-sbs>

Re:Imagining Change

Center for Story-based Strategy, 2010

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59b848d980bd5ee35b495f6e/t/59e0e5a63e00be03e1cff908/1507911101187/CSS-ReimaginingChange-1stEd+EBOOK.pdf>

- Phone blockade
- Storytelling

Principles

- Brand or be branded
- Bring the issue home
- Choose tactics that support your strategy
- Consider your audience
- Kill them with kindness
- Know your cultural terrain
- Lead with sympathetic characters
- Make the invisible visible
- Reframe the issue
- Seek common ground
- Show, don’t tell
- Stay on message
- The real action is your target's reaction
- Use your cultural assets

Theories

- Action logic
- Floating signifier
- Framing
- Memes
- Prefigurative politics
- The social cure

Methodologies

- Action star
- Battle of the story
- Perception box
- Points of intervention
- Story of self, us, and now

TAGS

Action design, Campaign strategy, Communications, Language, Media, Social media