

# NARRATIVE CHANGE FOR HEALTH & RACIAL EQUITY: EXPLORING CAPACITY & ALIGNMENT



BY JEWLYA LYNN, POLICYSOLVE  
& LYN KATHLENE

PREPARED ON BEHALF OF THE CALIFORNIA ENDOWMENT

OCTOBER 2020

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to the following individuals and organizations who participated in one or more phases of the study:

- Alianza Coachella Valley, Silvia Paz
- ASO Communications, Anat Shenker-Osorio
- Bay Rising, Irene Rojas-Carroll
- Bay Rising, Kimi Lee
- Black Organizing Project, Jackie Byers & Jasmine Williams
- Borealis Philanthropy, Zaineb Mohammed
- California Alliance for Youth & Community Justice, CAYCJ, Abraham Medina
- California Immigrant Policy Center, CIPC, Cynthia Buiza
- Californians for Justice, Saa'un P Bell
- Center for Story-based Strategy (CSS), Bernice Shaw
- Children's Partnership, Mayra Alvarez
- Color of Change, Rashad Robinson
- Communities for a New California Education Fund (CNC Education Fund), Pablo Rodriguez
- Congregations Organized for Prophetic Engagement (COPE), Rev Sam Casey
- The Center For Cultural Power, Favianna Rodriguez
- Del Norte Building Healthy Communities, Michelle Carrillo
- East LA Community Corporation (ELACC), Isela Gracian
- Eastside Arts Alliance, Elena Serrano
- Faith in the Valley, Andy Levine
- First Nations Development Institute (First Nations), Michael Roberts & Raymond Foxworth
- Fresno Building Healthy Communities, Sandra Celedon
- Genders & Sexualities Alliance Network (GSA Network), Marinarde Soto Espinoza
- Othering and Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley, Gerald Lenoir
- Health Access California (Health Access), Anthony Wright
- Jakara Movement, Naindeep Singh
- LA Commons, Karen Mack
- Long Beach Forward, James Suazo
- Mid-City Community Advocacy Network, Diana Rodriguez Ross
- Motivating Individual Leadership for Public Advancement (MILPA), Juan Gomez
- Narrative Initiative, Jee Kim, Rachel Weidinger & Jacob Swenson-Lengyel
- PICO California, Jennifer Martinez
- Power California (Power CA), Jung Hee Choi
- Race Forward, Jeff Chang
- Radical Communicators Network (RadComms), Shanelle Matthews
- ReFrame Mentorship, Joseph Phelan
- Resilience Orange County (Resilience OC), Oswaldo Farias & Claudia Perez
- Resource Media, Marla Wilson & Refugio Mata
- Revolve Impact, Mike de la Rocha
- Right to the City, Malcolm Torregon Chu
- Safe Return Project, Tamisha Walker
- Sol Collective, Estella Sanchez
- Kern Sol News, Reyna Olaguez
- TransLatin@ Coalition, Bamby Salcedo
- United We Dream, Cristina Jimenez
- Youth Leadership Institute, Sher Moua
- YR Media, Rebecca Martin & Nancy Deville

Thank you to Makani Themba at Higher Ground Change Strategies for assistance in interpreting the results.

Thank you to The California Endowment who funded this study and the following Endowment staff who were deeply involved in guiding the study implementation and exploring the results: Alex Desautels, Janine Saunders, Evangeline Reyes, Rachel Poulain, and Alicia Castro.

And finally, thank you to the staff at the Center for Outcomes Research and Education for assistance with data collection and coordination, including: Kristen Dulacki, Natalie Kenton, Michael Sutcliffe, and Maggie Weller.

**Recommended citation:** Lynn, Jewlya & Kathlene, Lyn (2020). Narrative change for health & racial equity: Exploring capacity & alignment. Prepared on behalf of The California Endowment. Denver, CO: PolicySolve, LLC.

## Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	1
Introduction: Overview of Study & Methods.....	5
Narrative Change Definitions .....	5
Key Findings.....	6
Snapshot of the Interviewees & Their Organizations .....	6
The Urgency of This Moment.....	7
Narrative Change Approaches.....	8
Two Stories of Narrative Change Campaigns.....	11
Power Building in Relationship to Narrative Change.....	13
Capacity & Infrastructure for Narrative Change.....	14
Scaling & Aligning Narratives.....	19
Feedback to Funders of Narrative Change.....	23
Using the Report Findings .....	24
Highlights for Funders .....	Attachment Page 1

## Executive Summary

In the fall of 2019, The California Endowment (TCE) commissioned a study to understand the capacity needs and strengths in California related to narrative change. The study was designed to be a participatory process where the findings would be grounded in a shared understanding with stakeholders directly involved in building power and changing narratives. It engaged over 40 narrative change leaders in California and nationally in shaping the study focus, data sources, and interpretation of results.

### The Urgency of This Moment

While the study began in 2019, the results are being completed and shared in 2020, after a pandemic has changed the world, disproportionately affecting communities of color, and the Black Lives Matter movement has gained traction nationally and globally.

“What we’re in right now is a fight for what the narrative is going to be. It takes a cataclysmic event like we’re in right now for those narratives to open up. It’s a once in a generation moment.” *Karen Mack, LA Commons*

“Given the urgency of now, it is all the more apparent that we need trust to let the work move forward.” *Discussion Group*

When the study findings were brought to participants for interpretation, they explored what was learned from the previous year’s interviews, but also stated, in many ways and no uncertain terms: ***the time for action is now***. The need for action is visible, both because of the suffering of Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC), the needs of communities, and the tremendous window of opportunity to change the narrative.

### Different Approaches to Narrative Change

Study participants articulated a diverse array of approaches and ways of understanding narrative change (Table 1, next page), approaches that resonated with almost all participants in the interpretation discussions conducted at the end of the study to review the findings. This is not surprising in an emergent field, where there are no “best practices” or widely agreed upon ways of advancing change.

**Each approach is distinct in how it centers different voices; the tools/tactics being used; how reach and impact are thought about; and even which capacities are priorities.** These approaches are **not in competition with each other**, so much as being representative of current distinctions in how narrative change is understood and deployed across these organizations. In fact, some participants were intrigued by the idea of

#### Narrative Change Definitions

For this study, TCE proposed a set of definitions related to narrative change and the 13 participants in Phase I of the study gave feedback, resulting in the following definitions:

**Narratives:** Narratives bring together the values, beliefs and stories that shape how we see people and places, communities and cultures, ideologies and institutions. We use narratives to interpret and make meaning of the past and present, and to envision the future.

**Narrative Change:** Narrative change is the process of disrupting dominant narratives that normalize inequity and uphold oppression and advancing new narratives from our communities and individuals in historically marginalized groups, narratives that help us dismantle social inequities and imagine a different future.

**Deep Narrative (also known as Meta-Narratives and Worldviews):** Deep narratives are the unquestioned “truths” that have been normalized by society and feel like common sense, but can uphold systemic oppression. They are amplified through institutions, structures, and power systems, along with norms and social behaviors. They cut across issue areas and include such things as sexism, racism, machismo, and other forms of patriarchy, as well as the role of government and concepts of individualism.

how these approaches are complementary and could be intentionally used in different narrative change strategies.

**Table 1. Four complementary approaches to narrative change**

	Approach A	Approach B	Approach C	Approach D
Summary	Narrative change as embedded into a larger power building and organizing approach that centers the voices of their community members.	Centers the voice of community members while also actively working across many communities and building networks working on aligned narratives.	Research-driven process, which may include many organizations at the table, that engages communities to deploy messages, frames, and narratives.	Mix of research and community-driven processes, all oriented around policy change processes (narrative as a tool to change policy).
Voices Centered	Begins first and foremost with the voices of people in their communities. Audiences are often the community members.	Often begins with a central narrative focus, but centers the voices of each community within that focus. May seek to reach larger audiences than just the communities.	Begins with research using strategic communications tools like polling, focus groups, and message testing. Explicitly focuses on larger audiences and significant reach.	Centers policymakers as the audience to reach, often with community members as the storytellers.
Reach/scale/desired impact	Deeply focused on the needs of one or a couple communities.	Works across communities, seeking alignment on central narratives.	Explicit, central goal of reaching many people and broadly shifting narratives.	Prioritizes policy change as the primary outcome.

Interviewees recognize narrative change as an integral part of power building, and power building as necessary to address inequities in California. As many participants said, in one way or another, “**narrative change does not equal power**” and, at the same time, narrative change can help build power. For some, power building is foundational and narrative is a strategy to build power. For others, narrative change is insufficient - narrative power is needed to drive meaningful changes. For interviewees using Approach C, there is also a tension between building power in communities to help change narratives and scaling the reach of narrative campaigns through other tactics that are less community-driven.

### Capacity & Infrastructure

Interviewees identified many different **capacities that organizations working on narrative change simply need more of** – some of which are needed across many organizations and some of which are needed only by a few organizations that can then share those capacities (Table 2).

**Table 2. Critical narrative change capacities**

<p><u>Critical, but missing or insufficient:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communications knowledge &amp; skills</li> <li>• Trauma support for storytellers</li> <li>• Understanding stories</li> <li>• Conducting research</li> <li>• Planning skills</li> <li>• Physical facilities</li> <li>• Rapid response capacity</li> </ul>	<p><u>Critical, but somewhat intangible:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Capacity to take actions that spread positive narratives (where actions, not words, change the narrative)</li> <li>• Humility, recognizing narrative change expertise as critical, but not the only expertise</li> </ul>	<p><u>Less critical, but missing:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Influencing the institutions (schools, museums, gov) where narratives are reinforced</li> <li>• Disseminating stories/narratives on TV/radio</li> </ul>
--	--	--

Critical, but missing or insufficient:

- Ethnic and community-controlled media
- Cultural work

Critical, but somewhat intangible:

Less critical, but missing:

### *Communications Capacity & Shared Infrastructure*

Across the interviewees, there were **very different ways of understanding what it means to engage in narrative change strategies, and where communications work fits into these strategies**. For some, narrative change is an umbrella term that many different types of work can help to advance (communications, cultural work, organizing, etc.). For others, narrative change is one of the tools in a communications toolbox, which can be deployed when shifting a narrative is needed to get to a policy or community-change goal.

Grassroots-focused organizations largely **did not want more communications capacity via new staff** with specialized roles (preferring capacity be built across existing staff and deeply embedded in the organization), while organizations focused on network and coalition building called out the **need for more dedicated communications staff**, including in grassroots organizations.

“For too long, we’ve just accepted that nonprofits don’t need narrative and communications capacity. But it is clear our investments in narrative change need to include those on the ground – local organizers, strategists and communicators – who are networked together.” *Jung Hee Choi, Power California*

Many participants are interested in various types of shared infrastructure, particularly around communications capacity or other narrative capacities, including via **multi-organization “hubs”** for narrative change, shared technology access, shared communications expertise, and infrastructure to help amplify narratives.

### *The Role & Risks of National Communications Firms*

Participants consistently held a strong point of view about their desired role for how national communications firms show up in California’s narrative change work: less involvement, less funding, and more investment in communities. They do not believe these firms share their values, bring enough value for the cost, offer relevant products, or build local capacity. They asked that smaller, more value-aligned firms be engaged instead, and only for the specific skills not available in communities.

“Stop paying for expensive comms firms disconnected from the community who ‘hoard’ resources, knowledge, and contacts.” *Anonymous*

### *Cultural Work in Relationship to Narrative Change*

Interviewees understood the relationship between cultural and narrative change strategies in very different ways. For some, **cultural work needs to be integrated into any narrative change** work and seen as core to shifting narratives. This has implications for how it is funded and staffed within an organization or with partners. The interviewees from grassroots organizations highlighted the importance of cultural work happening in partnership with people who have authentic stories to share. For others, **cultural work is a specific tactic**, one of many, to deploy in the context of a narrative change strategy. For one interviewee, **cultural change is the strategy and narrative shifts are a means** to make progress toward cultural change.

“Storytelling happens in all these different forms: in dance and music and theater and visual art... narrative means a story and that means storytellers/cultural workers.” *Anonymous*

### *Learning & Evaluation in Relationship to Narrative Change*

Across all groups, most interviewees reported they are doing relatively little formal evaluation. However, interest in learning is high and many interviewees would like more tools and ways of measuring progress.

They also recognize that outcomes and metrics for their campaigns have been too often imposed by funders and not allowed to be more emergent as their work advances.

## Scaling & Aligning Narratives

Many of the interviewees' organizations are already working on aligned narratives across communities, coalitions, networks, etc., often on narratives related to belonging and inclusion and a more just, equitable society. While some interviewees are having impact in just one community, most are working across communities either via multi-community power building that utilizes a narrative change approach or via large scale communications tools that seek to reach new audiences, often described by these interviewees as the "persuadable middle."

"Narrative change accelerates when a story of local struggle, rooted in place and community, joins a broader story of shared movement and experience." *Bernice Shaw, CSS*

Despite these successes, interviewees reported many barriers to aligning. One of the most significant appears to originate in **two very different understandings of what it means to deploy narrative change** across multiple organizations:

1. Narrative change requires organizations to share messages and branding, versus;
2. Narrative change is not about using the same words, but about moving a set of ideas, core beliefs, and core stories that express the narrative.

Notably, some narrative change consultants interviewed as part of the study advocated for the first approach and others advocated the second, helping to clarify at least part of how this confusion has arisen.

Another set of barriers comes from **how funders support narrative change work**, such as barriers to authentic, organic partnership, funding only for specific parts of narrative change strategies, and having limited support for experimentation. In general, those working locally saw the least opportunity and possibility of alignment, while those working across communities had more confidence. Those deploying research-driven approaches (rather than community-driven) tended to see more barriers, but were committed to overcoming them.

## Feedback to Funders

A separate attachment at the end of this report calls out specific, actionable items for funders to consider. These suggestions came unprompted from interviewees. In brief, they center the concept of **placing more trust, control, and flexibility in grantees** and the ecosystem of narrative change partners. This includes allowing time for the processes to happen organically; offering flexibility; being okay with experiments, even ones that fail; not dictating the issue or messages; letting go of the focus on common messages; not dictating the outcomes or being inflexible with outcomes/deliverables; and not building new infrastructure or external infrastructure, but rather supporting what already exists.

"Trust-based philanthropy is needed. If there is a belief that power is in the community, allow those orgs to use the resources to utilize their power and build it." *Mayra Alvarez, Children's Partnership*

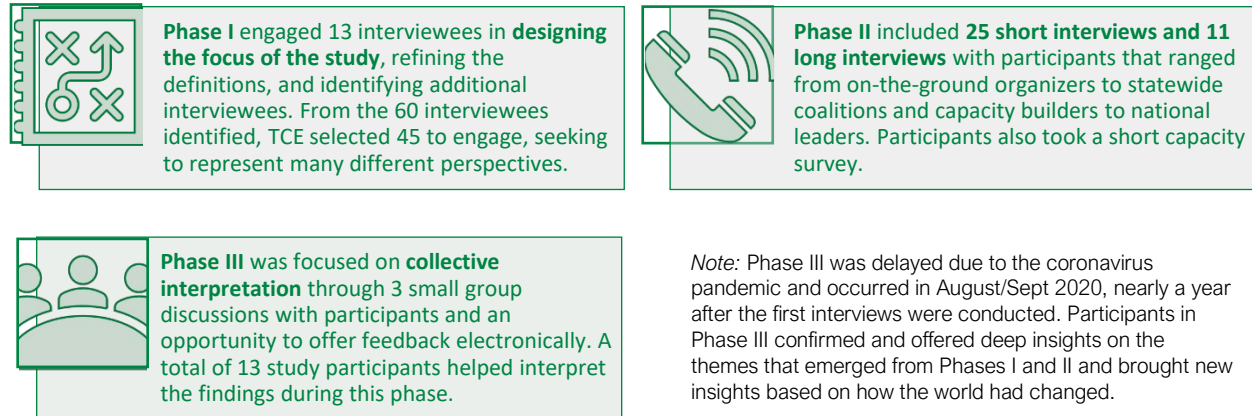
## Using the Report Findings

The participants who interpreted the findings asked that **funders be a primary audience** of the report, not just the program staff but also foundation leadership. They want to share the key insights of the study within their organizations and among partners in accessible ways (e.g. webinars or other presentations).

## Introduction: Overview of Study & Methods

In the fall of 2019, The California Endowment (TCE) commissioned a study to understand the capacity needs and strengths in California related to narrative change to advance health and racial equity. Given the emergent nature of narrative change practices and the ecosystem, TCE recognized that it was critical to not define “capacity,” but rather explore it with participants across the ecosystem. The participatory design engaged narrative change leaders in shaping the study focus, data sources, and interpretation of results.

Figure 1. Study Methods



The participatory approach was designed to ensure the findings would be developed collaboratively and grounded in a larger shared understanding, including from those who are building power and changing narratives. Phase I interviewees were selected to bring a diverse array of perspectives and Phase II interviewees were selected from the names Phase I interviewees suggested.

### Narrative Change Definitions

In an emergent field of practice, it can be hard to know if we’re all talking about the same thing and if each of our words carry the same meaning for different people. For this study, **TCE proposed a set of definitions related to narrative change and the 13 participants in Phase I of the study gave feedback**, resulting in these modified definitions that were used to guide data collection:

- **Narratives:** Narratives bring together the values, beliefs and stories that shape how we see people and places, communities and cultures, ideologies and institutions. We use narratives to interpret and make meaning of the past and present, and to envision the future.
- **Narrative Change:** Narrative change is the process of disrupting dominant narratives that normalize inequity and uphold oppression and advancing new narratives from our communities and individuals in historically marginalized groups, narratives that help us dismantle social inequities and imagine a different future.
- **Deep Narrative (also known as Meta-Narratives and Worldviews):** Deep narratives are the unquestioned “truths” that have been normalized by society and feel like common sense, but can uphold systemic oppression. They are amplified through institutions, structures, and power systems, along with norms and social behaviors. They cut across issue areas and include such things as sexism, racism, machismo, and other forms of patriarchy, as well as the role of government and concepts of individualism.



## Key Findings

In the Phase I interviews, study participants asked that this study look not just at capacities needed for narrative change, but also **how power is distributed, whose voices are heard, and how key capacities like cultural change strategies are integrated**. Phase II and III participants helped to explore these dynamics and capacities, both from within California and looking from outside and sharing national practices.

### Snapshot of the Interviewees & Their Organizations

The study participants represented part of a larger ecosystem of organizations advancing narrative change in California – while the collective set of voices and organizations in the study are not representative of all the different ways narrative change is being supported in the state, they do help us to see **the complexity, diversity, strengths, and opportunities that exist in the state**.

Some study participants came from organizations whose work is specific to a given community, where they organize and build power. Others came from organizations that work across many communities, often bringing a similar power building approach. Some participants came from organizations that focus on building networks or coalitions, and advancing regional or statewide advocacy, leveraging narrative change as one of many tools to get to a more just and equitable California. Finally, some interviewees come from organizations working from within California or outside the state as capacity builders, bringing narrative change expertise, deploying research, training others, and sometimes designing narrative change strategies. **Across this array of interviewees, narrative change was understood to mean many different things and, for some, continued to feel unclear and abstract.**

The organizations included in this study prioritized narrative change related to a variety of issues, ranging from justice and education to immigration and health. They also focused on many different populations including BIPOC generally, specific ethnic and racial groups, LGBTQ communities, Trans communities, low-income communities, youth, and other marginalized populations.

Their **approaches to narrative change varied greatly, and not all align with the study's definition of narrative change** (page 5). For some, narrative change was described as a primary strategy, an overarching umbrella under which all their work fits. For others, narrative change was described as one of the tools in a toolbox of ways to achieve justice and equity, as sitting under other overarching strategies like organizing, advocacy, communications, or coalition building.

### In Their Words

**A quick note on the report structure:** The report has quotes on every page, designed to center the voices of study participants. Some *quotes are attributed* to specific individuals, with their permission. Some are “*Anonymous*,” if permission to share by name was not given. Some are attributed to “*Discussion Group*” as they were anonymous postings from *Phase III*.

“We want to be able to create that larger ecosystem where we have shared narrative and values.” *Jung Hee Choi, Power California*

“Narrative change is also a new language that many of the organizations that are grassroots do not necessarily understand, however the work that we do is specifically to change the narrative of our communities.” *Bamby Salcedo, The TransLatin@ Coalition*

“I appreciate that there may be some organizations where narrative change is the goal, but for us, our narrative work is focused to win policy change. To advance systemic change, a key strategy is to change how people think about an issue which allows policy to follow in that direction, and to adopt various reforms that actually provide tangible improvements in people's lives.” *Anthony Wright, Health Access*

“Narrative change is a tactic within a strategy of power building.” *Pablo Rodriguez, Communities for a New California Education Fund*

## The Urgency of This Moment

When the study findings were brought to Phase III participants for interpretation, they explored what was learned from the previous year's interviews, but also stated, in many ways and no uncertain terms: *the time for action is now*. The need for action is visible, both because of the suffering of people of color, the needs of communities, and the tremendous window of opportunity to change the narrative.

### In Their Words

"What we're in right now is a fight for what the narrative is going to be. It takes a cataclysmic event like we're in right now for those narratives to open up. It's a once in a generation moment." *Karen Mack, LA Commons*

"The uprising that is happening right now...there are many conservative groups, police unions and even the government who are twisting this narrative...We want to make sure that funders understand the current political and historical moment which is shifting the way people think about police and the most marginalized communities." *Bamby Salcedo, The TransLatin@ Coalition*

"The end goal of just policy change has shifted with the rise of authoritarianism and white supremacy. There is more of a pressure or drive for narrative change to change hearts and minds and challenge assumptions." *Discussion Group*

"COVID has made it painfully clear that many of our crises accumulate into larger overarching crises that are guided by meta narratives." *Discussion Group*

"The political polarization continues to increase, while the situation of our communities is growing more dire, with no end in sight." *Discussion Group*

"The pandemic and the movement for racial justice has further focused the lives and experiences of people of color, of the daily injustice they face, and it's forcing the public to see this every day and it's harder to turn away." *Discussion Group*

"Given the current environment, I think there is a greater awareness of the need to build cross-sector movements that address intersectional issues and demonstrate solidarity." *Discussion Group*

"Narrative change is happening... we see that. Dreamer movement, Black Lives Matter. How do we move these narratives forward? That's where the issue of capacity is critical. Orgs on the ground need support on communications, organizing, research, advocacy strategies." *Discussion Group*

"Alignment but with flexibility in relation to crisis response. We live in such a period of uncertainty that it requires being able to hold multiple realities at the same time." *Discussion Group*

"BLM is challenging narrative on policing, but there is another narrative they are changing around race - that black people are lazy, criminal, and don't deserve." *Gerald Lenoir, Othering and Belonging Institute*

"We are continuing to confront the reality that some people don't have empathy for us." *Discussion Group*

"Given the urgency of now, it is all the more apparent that we need trust to let the work move forward." *Discussion Group*

## Narrative Change Approaches

Study participants articulated a diverse array of approaches and ways of understanding narrative change, approaches that resonated with almost all participants in the interpretation discussions in Phase III. This is not surprising in an emergent field, where **there are no “best practices” or widely agreed upon ways of advancing change**. The diversity of approaches makes it difficult to tell one story about where California’s narrative change capacity exists, what is needed, and how it might be strengthened.

For this reason, instead of describing the findings across all interviewees, the exploration below acknowledges that there appear to be four different approaches to narrative change (labeled A, B, C, and D) among the interviewees’ organizations. **Some organizations may participate in multiple approaches**, depending on campaigns and coalitions they are part of, the consultants that campaigns are working with, and the needs of the campaigns.

**Each approach is distinct in how it centers different voices; the tools/tactics being used; how reach and impact are thought about; and even which capacities are priorities.** These approaches are **not in competition with each other**, so much as being representative of distinctions that currently exist in how narrative change is understood and deployed across these organizations. In fact, some Phase III participants were intrigued by the idea of how these approaches are complementary and could be intentionally used in different strategies. The approaches include:



**Approach A:** Nearly half of the interviewees described **narrative change as embedded into a larger power-building and organizing approach that centers the voices of their community members**. Many of their organizations prioritized

narratives related to immigration, belonging, and youth issues, though a wide variety of community specific needs were also represented. Much of their narrative change work was issue specific, focused on addressing community needs, with less direct effort focused on deep narrative change. The study participants using this approach varied quite a bit in the extent to which narrative change was a central strategy of their organization versus one of many ways they seek to drive change. They described their narrative change work as **beginning first and foremost with the stories emerging from their communities**. For some, their community members are actively constructing narratives with them, and for others, their lead organizers are developing narratives from the stories they are collecting and hearing every day. Once narrative frameworks are developed, their strategies to advance the narratives are embedded in their organizing strategies, but also include

### In Their Words

“It does seem helpful to distinguish groups who use community members as the origin of their narratives versus organizations that may have budget for tools like polling. In some ways, this is a question of audiences and also messengers that the groups tap to shift the dominant narratives.” *Discussion Group*

“The multiple approaches speak to how NC hits many goals: building power, changing policy, change hearts/minds.” *Discussion Group*

“It’s helpful to visualize the ways of doing narrative change and entry points into the... the ability to see where we each fit, and how we can contribute to work underway.” *Discussion Group*

“Different approaches can be complementary in some ways. Differing audiences are OK: Some organizations will want to reach that “persuadable middle” with new narratives, while others can and should focus on power building within marginalized communities.” *Discussion Group*

“We’re in this mess because no one is listening to the communities... we have to break-up the narrative that has oppressed us as long as we’ve been a country.” *Discussion Group*

“We get whitestreamed when our communities aren’t there throughout.” *Discussion Group*

“Organizers know their base and where the opportunities are to shift narratives. If they are good at what they do, they can also craft narratives for audiences that aren’t just like themselves.” *Irene Rojas-Carroll, Bay Rising*

storytelling, cultural and arts strategies, policy advocacy, leadership development, and strategic communications.

Most of the organizations in Approach A are community-based, working in one specific geographic area (ranging from a specific city to multiple cities within a region). Additionally, a couple interviewees are in organizations that are primarily capacity builders who help community members and community organizations to engage in narrative change while centering community voices.



**Approach B:** A quarter of interviewees described an approach that **centers the voice of community members while also actively working across many communities and building networks working on aligned narratives.** These

organizations are engaging either across multiple communities within California or multiple communities in multiple states. The interviewees described their work as focused on building power and they prioritize concepts of justice, often racial justice, and belonging, with a mix of issue narratives and deep narratives. Most of these organizations use a **combination of collecting stories, community organizing, coalition building, and research** (including focus groups and other communications research) to identify narratives and develop campaigns. Their research strategies include power analysis and focus groups, along with deep listening across multiple communities.

Some of the interviewees talked about centering narrative change as the umbrella under which all other strategies live, while others utilize narrative change to advance specific policy issues. Many interviewees **described their work as movement building**, including cultivating champions and strengthening local movement leadership. Most of these organizations **have a long-term horizon perspective**, recognizing that their narrative change work in specific campaigns – some of which may be won and some lost – will contribute to the longer-term narrative change and are valuable from the perspective of shifting society toward equity and justice.



**Approach C:** Some interviewees described a narrative change approach that **begins with research using strategic communications tools like polling, focus groups, and message testing.** These interviewees indicated their work has

an **explicit, central goal of reaching many people and broadly shifting narratives**, with a commitment to developing narratives that will resonate with groups like the “persuadable middle.”<sup>1</sup> In these processes, the **voices**

<sup>1</sup> “Persuadable middle” was a term used by multiple interviewees, but not clearly defined. One discussion group suggested it refers to those whose political views are moderate, rather than defining the term as related to specific demographic groups.

## In Their Words

“Narratives come from people and we are a people powered organization.” *Rashad Robinson, Color of Change*

“The **networking** piece of this is the use of formal and informal networks to advance narratives. Formal networks are tables or actual networks like Power California. But informal networks are networks that arise in a given moment.” *Joseph Phelan, ReFrame Mentorship*

“We want narratives that not only resonate but they actually come from the ground up. We want them to come from impacted communities and people directly affected by the conditions and inequities we are trying to transform, not from Washington DC-based or big public relations firms.” *Jung Hee Choi, Power California*

“What we have to do is to relate messaging to narratives, and to think about all the ways that it’s not just about winning a campaign, but it’s about winning the long run: making a permanent shift.” *Jeff Chang, Race Forward*

“Narrative work feels so new, it’s hard to figure out how it integrates with power building...the folks who are leading the narrative change work are not necessarily the people who are directly impacted by all of the arena of issues that we work on.” *Jennifer Martinez, PICO California*

and narratives of communities are picked up through the research, rather than the direct participation of community members in the design process and surfacing of community stories as a starting place, as happens in the two groups above.

Many of the Approach C organizations are **prioritizing work on deep narratives (e.g. the role of government, the free market and racism)** that cut across many different issues. Interviewees explained that once the research stage is completed, they engage deeply with communities (or plan to engage soon) to adopt the narrative and come up with locally relevant strategies to deploy it. Some of the organizations with this approach to narrative change were capacity building providers and narrative strategists, while others were coalition/network organizations who planned to be intimately involved in running narrative change campaigns.



**Approach D:** The last group of interviewees described an approach that **prioritizes policy change as the primary outcome**, with narrative change as a means for achieving policy change. Their approach has **some elements of a research-driven process alongside other elements of a community-driven process**. What they have in common is **centering policymakers as their critical audience to reach**, though some also prioritized the “persuadable middle” and their broader communities. Interviewees using this approach have a variety of ways they distribute power in their narrative change work, and some described how community groups initiated the work and others described a more top-down approach where organizations initiated the work and then engaged communities.

Most of the interviewees using Approach D **did not see their organizations as having expertise in narrative change**, and reported they typically engage narrative change strategists to help design campaigns and build the skills of those in their networks. This means their specific approach to narrative change is heavily influenced by the strategists they engage.

Finally, a couple interviewees **did not view their work as narrative change**,<sup>2</sup> and did not describe their work in ways that indicate narrative change is likely happening. Instead, they described it as organizing and power building that directly benefits their communities and they shared examples of intentional messaging on community issues and needs. While they see ways that their work influences narratives indirectly, they did not report that they prioritize shifting narratives.

<sup>2</sup> These interviewees insights are included in the analysis and report wherever possible and relevant (e.g. barriers to alignment, feedback to funders), but they are not represented in any of the four approaches above.

## In Their Words

“Narrative infrastructure building and storytelling are critical elements because this is how people make meaning of what they see and hear... I'd say our research on narrative change right now and the persuadable middle right now, is very connected to lessons we learned from other campaigns.” *Cynthia Buiza, California Immigrant Policy Center*

“This is not just about the disruption of all narratives of oppression, but also about cultivating the narratives that we envision. I think we're trying to find a balance between two approaches of disruption and cultivation.” *CAYCJ member*

“I think the approaches are complementary and overlapping. The community must be centered and an overarching narrative should be a part of the story that knits community stories together.” *Discussion Group*

“Narrative power is the ability to define who and what matters. The difference, with story-based strategy is why and with whom the defining happens. A participatory methodology is essential in ensuring that the economic, cultural, and political power we are building is accountable to impacted communities.” *Bernice Shaw, CSS*

“Folks want to translate their article or theory of a specific concept into everyday lived experiences of community members, and that's not how community members perceive it. That is where the tension also rises.” *Oswaldo Farias, Resilience OC*

## Two Stories of Narrative Change Campaigns

The stories on this page and the next highlight two very different approaches that are being used in California to develop and deploy narrative change campaigns.

### Shared Story Table for Public Education: Education Built for Us All

The Shared Story Table, led by Californians for Justice, was designed to engage partner organizations in building narrative power and changing narratives related to systemic racism, racial inequality, and oppression in schools. From the beginning, it had a goal of building the power and visibility of young people, families, and teachers working together. It used a storytelling approach, with a narrative rooted in shared values to advance a collective vision.

The narrative development process, which took two years to complete, began by working with young people and families to surface what they love about their culture and neighborhoods, and what they envision for their communities – to “radically imagine what their communities look like beyond the challenges they face today.” After hundreds of people were engaged in this initial listening, five narrative frameworks were developed, and a smaller group of grassroots partners evaluated the frameworks against criteria – e.g. whether they advance racial justice, eliminate historical inequality, etc. They narrowed it down to one frame about abundance and flourishing communities and a second about reparations and restorative justice/economics. The third phase involved bringing these frameworks to a Shared Story Table with 17 organizations including teachers’ unions, where they were explored and voted on, resulting in a decision to move forward the restorative justice/economics framework. Implementation is designed to happen across partner organizations, on the ground, with youth and families, and be resourced and supported by Californians for Justice as the anchor organization.

## Million Voters Project

The Million Voters Project (MVP) formed a partnership with seven regional and statewide networks to imagine a different future for California and identify the narrative to advance a structural change agenda for equity and inclusion. Through their local affiliates, the participating organizations represent over 90 organizations in California.

MVP's goal is to have a shared narrative and set of core messages that its networks, affiliates and partners can use at scale to shape the political discourse and imagination in the state in order to win policy changes. To do this, MVP drew from ongoing research around the Race-Class Narrative (RCN), pioneered by Anat Shenker-Osorio and Ian Haney-Lopez, which has identified the insidious, racialized narratives that need to be addressed and overcome in order to reach multi-racial audiences and build a sense of a shared future together. Specifically, the RCN framework is intended to: 1) activate the base, 2) speak to "persuadable" audiences, and 3) alienate the opposition by leading with values, explicitly naming race and identifying the opposition.

Since 2019, MVP incorporated RCN elements into curriculum that trained thousands of organizers, volunteers and partner organizations and informed mass communications, direct voter work and day-to-day organizing. So far, through direct voter conversations and digital reach (e.g. short videos), MVP has been able to reach almost 2 million "persuadable" and under-mobilized voters in California. In addition to shared messages, the approach focused on developing content and engagement strategies for different ethnic and linguistic groups, specific to what will work in their communities, with support from a shared infrastructure to help with implementation and maintaining alignment. All content was message tested and measured for reach and engagement. Some content is being researched for further understanding around the impact on core beliefs that voters have about building an equitable future for California.

The RCN messaging performed well for "persuadables" across ethnic groups, increasing issue support among a range of issues. Messaging targeting base audiences produced promising results that need further exploration. For example, base content effectively decreased cynicism amongst base audiences and had widespread resonance amongst partner organizations that represented a diversity of constituencies, languages and geographies. However, initial testing with the base content did not produce statistically significant mobilization results. For this reason, additional research was deployed including comparative message testing. The project grappled with a tension, one described by multiple interviewees across multiple narrative change campaigns, that occurs when research is focused on developing narratives that will resonate with broad audiences, while one of the goals is deep engagement with and implementation of messages by affected communities. This led to the project doing more targeted content development and adopting more flexibility in the structure of the messaging, while maintaining the core values of a multi-racial, multi-class future for California.

## Power Building in Relationship to Narrative Change

Interviewees, and Phase III participants in particular, **recognize narrative change as an integral part of power building**, and power building as necessary to address inequities in California. As many participants said, in one way or another, “**narrative change does not equal power**” and, at the same time, narrative change can help build power.

While there was a common theme of seeing a relationship between power and narrative change, the direction and nature of the relationship differed across the four groups described above. Interviewees in organizations that center the voices of people in the community (approaches A and B) articulated a deep commitment to power building, describing **power building as foundational and narrative change as a strategy to achieve power**. They explained that narratives must come from the ground up and be meaningful to people on the ground.

**A** Among the grassroots organizations, the interviewees talked about how they support individuals to tell their story (often using the approach from the Center for Story-based Strategy) in order to build their power. They emphasized the importance of **having narratives, stories, and concepts that come from the community**, not being offered to the community, and not just from anyone in the community, but from those whose lived experiences best relate to the narrative.

**B** Among the more network-based organizations with statewide or national reach that center community voices, they described **building power with communities** as a combination of building the capacity of community members, not just organizations; having community members be centered as the “influencer” on the narratives; supporting on-the-ground organizing; and building connectivity across grassroots groups and other influencers. Some also reported using tools for assessing and understanding types of narrative power. They were explicit about the importance of **creating opportunities for people to tell their own stories, not manipulating stories to fit the campaign or narrative framework**.

Interviewees in organizations that utilize research-driven designs and/or prioritize policy change and advocacy (approaches C and D) tended to have a different way of thinking about the relationship between power building and narrative change:

**C** For some interviewees, they have struggled with the **tension they have experienced between scaling reach to build narrative power and building community power**, where limited resources are stretched between the support for grassroots work and the

### In Their Words

“Power only recognizes another power equal or greater to itself. Narrative Change alone does not equal power.” *Discussion Group*

“Narratives are not static. They are evolving and competing for dominance and traction. That’s why it’s important to think about narratives in relationship to power. The more power we have, the more we can contest oppressive narratives and advance ones that liberate us.” *Jung Hee Choi, Power California*

“The person with the most authentic voice is the person who can say that is my firsthand experience. Therefore, I can offer that story, but I can also say what I think would make it better.... one of the ways we build power is by giving people who are in closest proximity to the oppression the choice and the option to be able to use their experiences in their voice to make change.” *Shanelle Matthews, RadComms*

“When we’ve actually been able to pass laws, we’ve had narrative power, not just narrative change. We have narrative change on something like guns. But we don’t have narrative power and as a result we haven’t been able to pass certain legislation. The difference is the gap between narrative change and narrative power.” *Rashad Robinson, Color of Change*

“Grassroots voices don’t necessarily have to lead in front – they can lead from behind and in partnership, as part of a broader effort. We need to interrogate the progressive default that the most affected must lead and be more precise about audience and intended impact.” *Anonymous*



significant investment they expect their strategic communications work to require to scale their reach to new audiences.

**C** Some interviewees described narrative change work that prioritizes engaging individuals who already have influence (rather than centering building the power and influence of community members). These interviewees also described an approach that includes asking many different stakeholders to use statewide research and/or tested messages as the basis of their local narrative change work. In this context, **a more narrow definition of narrative power was centered**, sometimes without reference to building the power of marginalized voices or communities.

**D** Some interviewees are in advocacy organizations that partner with power building groups and support narrative work, but are **not organizing communities** themselves or deploying their own narrative strategies. Others have both power building strategies and narrative strategies, but **do not currently integrate the two**.

The many interviewees across the four groups who described a distinct **concept of narrative power**, not just narrative *change*, articulated a common view: it is not enough to deploy messages, cultural strategies, stories, and other communications tools to shift mindsets – **power building has to accompany narrative change**.

### Capacity & Infrastructure for Narrative Change

Interviewees identified many different **capacities that organizations working on narrative change simply need more of** – some of which are needed across many organizations and some of which are needed only by a few organizations that can then share those capacities. Many different interviewees acknowledged a fundamental capacity that is needed in this field: **a shared understanding of narrative change**, the tools of narrative change, and how to integrate narrative change into the work they are already doing.

The following capacities were identified as both **critical and largely missing**, or where present, insufficient to meet the needs:

- Communications knowledge and skills, from media engagement to social media to developing messages and frames;
- Support for “firsthand” storytellers who are retraumatized by telling their stories;
- Understanding of stories, their structures, and a willingness to use villains, heroes, and claims;
- Conducting research as part of narrative strategy;

### In Their Words

“It’s about building narrative power. All of the work is geared towards having folks think about & actively build greater power to advance their narratives.” *Jeff Change, Race Forward*

“Power building is a ‘both/and’ approach - narrative and community power. Narratives that come from our communities aren’t always palatable... power of the narrative vs. the power of the community to define the narrative.” *Discussion Group*

“We need a common vocabulary that is shared throughout the sector, not just a few key people in each organization. It would be really helpful to create some shared definitions.” *Jung Hee Choi, Power California*

“There’s also a need for ongoing training & capacity building about what ethical storytelling looks like in practice.” *Discussion Group*

“There is a need for a lot more intentionality around self-care, mental health, including for the young people. And for finding ways to recenter our cultural practices.” *Mike de la Rocha, Revolve Impact*

“Yes, narrative change work is about building skills and capacity, but for individuals who are at the center of why narrative change work needs to be done, telling those stories is a healing process and we should not lose sight of that reality and need.” *Tamisha Walker, Safe Return Project*

“In so many under-resourced communities, the level of trauma that is there has to be taken into consideration in the production process – it’s something you have to work through to be able to tell your story, and feel good about sharing it.” *Rebecca Martin, YR Media*

- Planning skills, including integrating narrative change strategies into organizational plans and developing explicit narrative change plans;
- Physical facilities for engaging in narrative change work, including recording studios and spaces for community meetings (note: this data was collected pre-COVID and the need for gathering spaces may or may not have changed);
- Rapid response capacity, including the ability to act quickly and strategically when an external event makes the problematic dominant narrative more fragile; and
- Ethnic media and community-controlled media. While this may not be a capacity of a specific organization, more of a capacity within the media environment, it was brought up by a variety of interviewees as critical for being able to get their narratives out to a larger audience.

Another tangible capacity that comes naturally with organizing work is the **ability to take a wide variety of actions that help spread a positive narrative**. Interviewees did not name this as a capacity, yet they shared many examples of narrative change work where it was not the words, messages, or even stories that carried the narrative, but rather the actions of youth, people of color, and others, who were behaving very visibly (e.g. with media coverage) in ways that conflicted with negative narratives and supported new narratives.

In addition to these tangible skills and capacities, quite a few interviewees who had been involved in a variety of different narrative change planning processes identified **humility** as absent from the processes, defined by them as **recognizing that narrative strategy expertise is critical and yet is not the only expertise needed**. Interviewees expressed frustration with narrative change planning processes that centered “expert” knowledge in ways that minimized the experience, knowledge, and skills of grassroots groups and communities.

Some capacities were largely not available among interviewees organizations, and were also **not as often named as critically needed in the field**, including the capacity to:

- Influence institutions (e.g. schools, museums, government) where narratives are reinforced, including the ability to identify when/where to influence institutions to change narratives and sustain the influence over time. A few interviewees in Phase I **saw this capacity as critical and missing**. Phase II interviewees, in contrast, saw the capacity missing, but didn’t talk about it as critical; and
- Disseminate stories/narratives via radio and TV. This capacity was widely indicated as lacking among organizations interviewed, but rarely discussed as needed.

## In Their Words

“Communities/organizations have to sense the current state of the narrative and be ready to respond to it – it’s rapid response work.” *Rachel Weidinger, Narrative Initiative*

“Very often, mainstream media doesn’t shine a light on issues that impact marginalized and vulnerable populations. Youth media and ethnic media are critical for telling our stories the way we want to tell them.” *Reyna Olaguez, Kern Sol News*

“I think of telling stories that aren’t always seen in mainstream media. Stories happening on the ground in the community but not picked up for whatever reason.” *Sher Moua, Youth Leadership Institute*

“Effective narrative change process should not replicate inequities by privileging certain voices or certain kinds of expertise as experts over the voices of those directly impacted.” *Jung Hee Choi, Power California*

“There is a need for folks in the narrative space to check egos at the door – recognize they can’t offer all the solutions.” *Shanelle Matthews, RadComms*

“Influencing institutions is the most important narrative change capacity because it puts a hand on levers of change. For example, Reclaiming Native Truth was trying to understand the narrative the public believes about Indians, how judges and lawmakers view legislation, authority, sovereignty, etc. It became clear to us there was no place for Indians in any of those institutions. When looking at blacks or undocumented, it is likely that TCE will run into similar invisibility/absence of these groups because the levers of power exclude them.” *Michael Roberts, First Nations*

Narrative change capacity was also understood by many interviewees as more than a staff person or a tactical skill; rather, interviewees reported that **knowledge and capacity need to be integrated into many different functions** in an organization. This theme showed up most strongly in organizations that have a grassroots focus, but even those with a network approach that mobilized many different groups highlighted the fundamental need to recognize narrative change as cutting across positions and roles.

### *Communications Capacity in Relationship to Narrative Change*

Across the interviewees, there were **very different ways of understanding what it means to engage in narrative change strategies, and where communications work fits into these strategies**. Notably, not all of these approaches align with the way narrative change was defined for the purposes of the study. For some, narrative change is an umbrella term that many different types of work can help to advance (communications, cultural work, organizing, etc.). For others, narrative change is one of the tools in a communications toolbox, which can be deployed when shifting a narrative is needed to get to a policy or community-change goal.

Most interviewees, even within organizations who center narrative change in their work, did not report having dedicated communications staff. However, there were **differences in opinions on the best way to build communications capacity**. Organizations implementing narrative change with community voices centered (approaches A and B) indicated that more training, mentoring and capacity building is needed to build communications capacity. They largely **did not want more communications capacity via new staff** with specialized roles, in part because of the sustainability of those roles, but also because of their view that narrative change needs to be infused throughout the organization rather than treated as solely a communications function.

These same interviewees (approaches A and B) indicated that **having a deep understanding of how narrative change fits within their organization's mission, goals, and strategies** will lead to a coherent, sophisticated approach to deploying narrative change campaigns. They reported that this is more critical than having traditional communications capacity, though communications capacity is an important tool in the toolbox of narrative change work and can play a role specifically in scaling the reach of organizing. These interviewees were also very clear that funders have created barriers to narrative change work by treating communications skills as a tactical expertise that can be brought in from the outside rather than a capacity to be built within and across organizations.

Many of the interviewees who work as capacity building providers or help to support large networks of grassroots organizations (often in organizations

### In Their Words

"It's critical to have dedicated comms staff responsible for proliferating the messages, but also know it's everyone's job to do communications and understand it." *Shanelle Matthews, RadComms*

"I think communications work is about winning in this moment. It's about leveraging the current set of narratives we have to drive us to victory on a specific set of goals. It's about messaging to people. It's about polling and research in that regard. But polling is not about narrative change...Just like you wouldn't have your wedding planner write your vows, you don't have your pollster write your narrative." *Rashad Robinson, Color of Change*

"The Right does better with this – social justice organizations don't have capacity to amplify our vision, explain why our vision is correct, and why it matters. For too long, we've just accepted that nonprofits don't need narrative and communications capacity. But it is clear our investments in narrative change need to include those on the ground – local organizers, strategists and communicators – who are networked together." *Jung Hee Choi, Power California*

"Whether it's called narrative change or something else, organizers are involved in narrative change, every day." *Gerald Lenoir, Othring and Belonging Institute*

"Given the continued saturation of information, communications capacity is that much more important to ensure our message is permeating." *Discussion Group*

"There is a great need for comms capacity, training and funding." *Discussion Group*

using approaches C and D) called out the **need for more dedicated communications staff**, including in grassroots organizations.

### *Building Shared Narrative Infrastructure*

Phase III discussion group participants and many interviewees in approaches C and D identified a variety of ways that **shared narrative capacity** could be built, in addition to supporting individual organizations.

Some described shared capacity as including **multi-organization “hubs”** for narrative change, shared technology access, shared communications expertise, and infrastructure to help amplify narratives. These interviewees wanted to see support for development of leaders from communities, strengthening of networks and relationships (leading to the ability to act together and act rapidly), and building infrastructure within existing coalitions and networks, instead of starting something new. Among the other benefits of shared capacity, it was seen by participants as a means for creating sustainable capacity that could drive movements for the long-haul.

### *The Role & Risks of National Communications Firms*

Interviewees across different approaches expressed frustration with the role that national communications firms have played in California across a variety of communications and narrative change campaigns. This was also a prominent part of the Phase III discussions. Study participants were very concerned that, in their experiences, these **national communications firms**:

- **Do not share the equity and justice values of the campaigns they are supporting** due to their profit-seeking priorities;
- Cost too much, using up a disproportionate percentage of the resources available for narrative and power building work;
- Offer “cookie-cutter” tools, approaches, and processes, which is particularly problematic in an emergent area like narrative change;
- Bring an **“expert-led” model** that does not value other types of expertise and experience;
- Do not build communications capacity within organizations;
- Offer too little value; and
- **Are not able to work effectively with grassroots groups.**

While some participants noted these larger national firms have a place in the work, they reported that they see the role of the firms as much narrower, focused on utilizing the specific to skills and capacities that only they have instead of using them to do many different types of work. They would rather resources be invested in movements, including building the skills within movements to design and deploy narrative strategies, rather than in “experts” who are outside of the movements. Other participants

## In Their Words

“We need greater investment in narrative infrastructure at multiple levels that centers people/communities impacted.” *Discussion Group*

“Building capacity internally preserves authenticity, but shared resources could be helpful.” *Discussion Group*

“Narrative capacity is not built through consultants – it’s built through movements with the skills to design and deploy narrative strategies. We need to stop investing in strat comms as a tactical expertise that can be outsourced to “experts.” This model of “renting” expertise instead of building it internally isn’t working.” *Joseph Phelan, ReFrame Mentorship*

“There is such a need – a big gap between grassroots communication strategies and the balance of culture/arts and how it fits within narrative change, and then the big communications firms that tend to be very out of touch with the grassroots groups.” *James Suazo, Long Beach Forward*

“Transactional style engagement with comms firms doesn’t work. Some of these firms have a lot of arrogance - expert to peer model. They need more humility about what it means to work on the ground. They need more process conversation, more clarity about assumptions.” *Juan Gomez, MILPA*

“Stop paying for expensive comms firms disconnected from the community who ‘hoard’ resources, knowledge, and contacts.” *Anonymous*

pointed out that there are smaller, regionally-based communications firms that align on values and are able to work in partnership while building local capacity. These are the partners whom they want to see at the table.

### *Cultural Work in Relationship to Narrative Change*

Interviewees understood the relationship between cultural and narrative change strategies in very different ways. For some, **cultural work needs to be integrated into any narrative change** work and seen as core to shifting narratives. This has implications for how it is funded and staffed within an organization or with partners. The interviewees from grassroots organizations highlighted the importance of cultural work happening in partnership with people who have authentic stories to share. For others (primarily organizations using Approach C), **cultural work is a specific tactic**, one of many, to deploy in the context of a narrative change strategy. For one interviewee, **cultural change is the strategy and narrative shifts are a means** to make progress toward cultural change.

Cultural change strategies among organizations doing narrative change work varied from the **creation of new cultural works** that tell the stories of the community and share the narrative to **supporting cultural workers** and the pipeline of cultural workers to be narrative leaders to **seeking to influence the priorities and decisions of platforms** that disseminate cultural work broadly (e.g. HBO, Netflix, Hollywood leaders).

A few organizations are bringing together **cultural change work with power building** and community organizing, such as engaging cultural organizations to help grassroots partners utilize cultural strategies; and bringing community members and youth together with musicians, artists, and actors so they can hear directly from the community and amplify their stories. As interviewees explained it, these **cultural partnerships are critical because they bring the narratives to life** - they engage the senses of the audience and make the narratives vibrant and real. They also help explain complex concepts in more accessible ways, helping to bring audiences along.

### *Learning & Evaluation in Relationship to Narrative Change*

Across all groups, most interviewees reported they are doing relatively little formal evaluation. However, there were examples of a variety of types of signals they are paying attention to informally and within some structured learning practices. Where formal measurement is happening, often it is with the tools/methods typical to strategic communications, giving less attention to the underlying frames and context of how a narrative is being deployed and more attention to reach and repetition of key messages. While interviewees' examples of formal analytical methods for understanding change were limited to exploring the impact on direct audiences of the campaign, interviewees **shared other emerging methods they want to use**,

### In Their Words

"Storytelling happens in all these different forms: in dance and music and theater and visual art... narrative means a story and that means storytellers/cultural workers."  
*Anonymous*

"To advance our narrative change work is to develop a pipeline of culture change makers, storytellers, artists and culture creators and strategists within our own network, to lead narrative change and shape culture whether that is supporting undocumented artists in our communities or creating training spaces for storytelling and writing so that immigrant youth can be the next writers in the writing rooms creating the next Netflix shows or Hollywood films, et cetera."  
*Cristina Jimenez, United We Dream*

"Hollywood work can be 'moonshot' work – hard to judge what will have an impact when so much is out of your control, especially in the contemporary media and technology landscape."  
*Anonymous*

"When the goal is narrative shift, cultural work is an incredibly important *tactic* that exists within an array of viable tactics, all of which should be used based on the overarching purpose and the theory of change you hold for narrative shift."  
*Anat Shenker-Osorio, ASO Communications*

"We need cartoons about social justice, the sesame street of this s\*\*\*. We need to get outside ourselves – experience the sight, sense, and smell – even having food around this narrative."  
*Juan Gomez, MILPA*

"Cultural work can illustrate complex systems through language and visuals – sharing messages in a different way."  
*Shanelle Matthews, RadComms*

often related to media and exploring how stories are showing up and audiences are reacting.

Multiple interviewees described **iterative learning processes** that bring together informally collected insights, experiential information, and sometimes formal analytical information to steadily assess, refine, and adapt strategies and the narratives themselves. Interviewees also **asked for more tools to evaluate narrative change including the impact of cultural and arts strategies** and **more opportunities to learn together** with partners, in coalitions, and beyond existing coalitions.

Significant additional insight was shared about how funders can approach evaluation and learning differently, including its relationship to grant agreements. This is shared in the funder feedback section below.

### Scaling & Aligning Narratives

Most, though not all, interviewees believe there is a need and opportunity to align around shifting narratives. They also see natural alignment already happening related to a series of deep narratives that carry resonance across their communities including:

- Belonging and inclusion (as an alternative to racism);
- Government as a vehicle for good;
- A more just, equitable society;
- Justice and dignity for all people; and
- Protecting our planet.

Before we explore the ideas that interviewees shared for where alignment could be expanded, it is critical to acknowledge how many of their organizations are already working on aligned narratives across communities, coalitions, networks, etc., often on these specific narrative areas of focus.

#### Existing Alignment/Scaling Approaches

While most interviewees did describe their work as having impact across communities, some interviewees using Approach A described above reported they are explicitly not seeking to have impact beyond their local community and are not trying to align with other, larger narrative change efforts. This does not mean their local work has no regional or statewide relevance, but the priority of their work is to improve their local community and build local power.

Most interviewees, however, reported approaches that are reaching many different audiences across many communities – in other words, working at a fairly large scale and aligning across organizations when it comes to trying

#### In Their Words

“We need shared ways to measure NC and cultural strategy. Looking at the stickiness and reach is important. Its production value and the quality of the work produced and audience it is for are all components that need to be measured.”  
*Favianna Rodriguez, The Center for Cultural Power*

“Be cautious regarding metrics-driven approaches that can limit the number voices and creativity.”  
*Discussion Group*

“As a big believer in the power of partnership, I am very much in the camp that alignment is happening and needs to be expanded with flexible resources.”  
*Discussion Group*

“We should seek to build alignment. It will take us creating space for orgs to come together to explore what alignment means in terms of key vision, values and political outlook and worldview. It means assessing the dominant societal narrative and creating counter-narratives aimed at affecting popular views.” *Discussion Group*

“Narrative change accelerates when a story of local struggle, rooted in place and community, joins a broader story of shared movement and experience.”  
*Bernice Shaw, CSS*

“Narrative alignment is difficult and needs to be done in the right away...Narrative alignment has to emerge and be built out of aligned strategy, trust and relationships.” *Discussion Group*

to influence narrative change. They reported three distinctly different ways this alignment is happening, which may have implications for how to align narrative work in the future:

- For most of the organizations that center community voice, but also work at scale (those using Approach B), they are aligning narratives through **deep engagement and power building with many different communities**. This work operates with an assumption that **change can happen locally and across localities at the same time**. Because these organizations work with communities who see the relevance of the narrative already prioritized by the organization, and the organization is listening to how each community understands and wants to use the narrative, the interviewees described work that naturally results in alignment across communities.
- For other interviewees (most of whom are using Approach C), scaling is happening or predicted to happen by **reaching new audiences in significant numbers**, including those well outside the base, often with a focus on the “persuadable middle.” While this term wasn’t defined by participants explicitly, some described it as those beliefs and priorities that are politically in the middle. Their work seeks to maximize the reach to new populations through strategic communications tools (e.g. media and social media reach strategies) and working with organizing groups. Prioritizing the “persuadable middle” alongside organizing the base has led to some tensions and uncertainty among the organizations trying this approach. Some organizations in these campaigns worry that they might activate people whose beliefs lead to actions in opposition to each other, or that they are compromising how they are talking about the issues in order to appeal to new audiences.
- For those with a statewide or regional advocacy focus (Approach D), their scaling of narrative work occurs through **coalition building across communities and working together on aligned narratives, often with clear policy goals as the starting place**. This work includes locally-driven power building strategies. These organizations operate with an assumption that change can happen through intentional collaboration and alignment with organizations working across different local communities who share a policy goal or issue priority.

### Challenges to Aligning Narratives

While most interviewees reported they are in some way or another working to scale and align narratives, most also saw **many barriers to working in alignment on deep narratives**, including the need for better understanding of what it means. For some, there was worry that working on deep narratives in alignment would require using the same script or having

### In Their Words

“We’re seeing the beginning of [alignment], the first sign through shared language, key words like restorative justice, transformative justice, transformative solidarity.”  
*CAYCJ member*

“It is ok to have informal networks that share short term alignments. Pushing for long term collaboration can be counter intuitive and dilute messages.” *Discussion Group*

“Narrative alignment is difficult and needs to be done in the right away. Often times past experiences with narrative alignment have been funder driven or top down. Narrative alignment has to emerge and be built out of aligned strategy, trust and relationships.”  
*Discussion Group*

“It’s been a super challenging to get that research, because when speaking to the middle or seeking to a larger swath of people that might be able to help move the issue, sometimes feels like we’re compromising how we would rather be talking about it, how folks who are activated and directly impacted would rather be talking.” *Jennifer Martinez, PICO California*

“Testing shows that messages people recognize are rated to be more convincing and more pleasing – irrespective of the content of the message. Familiar messages create cognitive ease – a sense that something is familiar and so it makes sense, it seems right. Plus it is just virtually impossible to break a signal through the noise. For this reason, narrative change requires repeating the message over and over and over again until you are so bored of it, you feel everyone must be too.” *Anat Shenker-Osorio, ASO Communications*

consensus on these highly complex issues, as they have been told by narrative change consultants when engaging in narrative work across organizations in the past. Other interviewees understood alignment to be about agreeing on underlying narratives even as the stories, messages, and frames being used may differ depending on the voices and issues each organization prioritizes. Underlying these comments were the **conflicting ways interviewees understood the tools, approaches, and levels of narrative change**. Another complicating factor is that many interviewees had difficulty imagining prioritizing the issues their organization currently works on while also prioritizing related, but distinct, deep narratives. This may be the result of previous experience that has left interviewees believing that working on deep narratives will require engagement in separate, distinct campaigns, as opposed to intentional alignment within existing work.

One interviewee emphasized that underlying some of the differences in goals lies a larger dynamic: the diversity of California and the long history of conflict and differing needs between communities of color and other marginalized groups, **requiring reparative work before alignment is possible**. Others had practical concerns, observing that the field lacks capacity, infrastructure, and aligned funding to do this work together and collaboration on any shared goal is difficult. The prevalence of shared narrative change work (explained in the scaling examples above) suggests there may be practices and tools that can help with these barriers.

Narrative change organizations prioritizing community voice while working at scale (those with Approach B) signaled that **alignment is negatively affected by the ways in which funders advance narrative change**, including short-term funding; funding specific parts of narrative change strategies; having limited support for experimentation; funding at too low a level to see significant narrative shifts; and creating their own tables, capacity building mechanisms, and narratives instead of listening to and reinforcing the work happening in communities and across communities.

Discussion group participants emphasized that **alignment takes real time and capacity**. When funders or others attempt to rush it, force partnerships among organizations without a history of working together, and do not allow processes to emerge organically, they fail. They described desired processes that instead are well resourced for each organization involved, build on existing relationships, are deeply grounded in the communities involved, and take time to understand dominant narratives and create new narratives.

### *Experiences & Beliefs about Aligning Narratives*

Interviewees' beliefs about the potential of aligning narratives differed based on the approach they brought to narrative change and the reach of their current narrative change work:

### In Their Words

"Narratives are on different levels – policy and changing world view. It's important to figure out and understand how these integrate. BLM is challenging the narrative on policing, but there is a larger narrative they are changing around race - that black people are lazy, criminal, and don't deserve." *Gerald Lenoir, Othering and Belonging Institute*

"There has to be flexibility and understanding around how narratives get operationalized - what it looks like in one community is not how it looks in another. We're not trying to have the same words - we're trying to move a set of ideas or core beliefs, core stories about the role of gov, policing, public safety." *Discussion Group*

"California is a large, diverse state. It is not monolithic in its politics. **People of color** – different races/ ethnicities/ nationalities can be at odds with each other due to different historical racism/ different current needs. It hinders alignment." *Sam Casey, COPE*

"I think part of the whole nature of this being a field that's emerging is that not every organization has a shared understanding of how to approach this work and particularly how to co-create narratives in a way that has sufficient buy in from the partners that need to be propagating them and that they really reflect legit experiences of everyone who they purport to represent." *Marla Wilson, Resource Media*

"Ideally we would have a broader narrative for many solutions to fit under – not a new narrative for every solution." *Anthony Wright, Health Access*



- Some interviewees, particularly those who center community voice and work within a smaller geographic area (all using Approach A), **tend to see alignment as difficult to achieve and are not concerned if it does not happen.** However, these same interviewees also had fewer examples of opportunities to engage in work designed to help align narratives or had been involved in a specific failed attempt at alignment. They also shared examples of how organizations in their communities operate in ways contrary to the deep narratives they are trying to change, such as having oppressive internal policies while seeking to change narratives that support racism and sexism.
- For many of the interviewees using a research-centered approach (all using Approach C), the **experience of collaboration has been challenging enough that aligning narratives feels daunting.** Interviewees reported that the research itself is a critical tool for building alignment, but also shared that their coalition members do not always agree with what the research tells them. This led some interviewees to propose that alignment on a long-term vision and shared language is more important than alignment on narratives or campaigns. Some of the interviewees were involved in campaigns that asked participants to use specific messages to advance narratives (rather than aligning the narratives that underly many different messages and stories), which may contribute to their belief that aligned narrative work is particularly difficult.
- Some interviewees, particularly those with an advocacy focus (using Approach D) reported feeling **fairly positive about the potential of alignment and early examples of it.** They saw less resistance, fewer barriers, and growing movement toward alignment on deep narratives about inclusion, belonging, patriarchy, sexism, racism, and justice.
- Some interviewees have experience advancing aligned narratives through coalitions that center community voices (primarily using Approach B). These organizations have a commitment to a long-time horizon that enables them to **develop narratives aimed at changing deep narratives and build buy-in along the way.** These interviewees were confident alignment on deep narratives can happen.

This dynamic of grassroots organizations questioning whether alignment is possible while network building organizations are reporting success suggests that **alignment efforts are falling far short at this critical level of narrative change deployment within communities.**

## In Their Words

“Organizations can talk about the liberator role, being against sexism and racism, but then their own org policies reinforce the oppressive narrative: not having equal pay, not intentionally hiring BIPOC in decision-making positions, not having paid leave for female employees or equipment to breastfeed or a place to pump.” *Mari Soto Espinoza, Genders and Sexualities Alliance*

“Efforts towards alignment via arranged marriages between organizations have been painful. Often because of differing philosophies and definitely differing priorities.” *Discussion Group*

“Alignment is definitely difficult but it’s also necessary for power building across issues and communities.” *Discussion Group*

“We’re in this mess because no one is listening to the communities. It has to start from the community. Those who are ‘up here’ don’t listen to the community...But we have to break-up the narrative that has oppressed us as long as we’ve been a country.” *Karen Mack, LA Commons*

“How grassroots and statewide groups work effectively together is key to power building and narrative change. It is not a one-size-fits-all approach.” *Discussion Group*

## Feedback to Funders of Narrative Change

Though the interview questions did not ask for feedback about how funders are supporting narrative change, all of the interviewees offered insights about how funders can change their behaviors in order to better support narrative change work. At the center of how study participants reflected on the role of funders in narrative change was one core message: **step back, release control, and trust us**. Trust in the people in communities leading this work; trust the partnerships that exist already; trust the messages that emerge from communities; step back and give room for communities to have power.

At a practical level, study participants had advice on what it looks like to step back and trust grantees, including:

- **Put trust in the processes that you fund**, in order to generate outcomes you can support, instead of holding power over the outcomes;
- **Support communities** to advance narrative change, rather than investing in communications firms to identify narratives and produce messages;
- **Support more narrative change capacity**, including communications staff, amplification, and rapid response;
- Offer this support in ways that are less directive, less likely to trigger competition among narrative change organizations, and less focused on funder priorities (more **focused on grassroots priorities**);
- **Allow the time** for collaborative processes – let them move at the speed of trust;
- **Offer flexibility**. Ideally, provide general operating grants, decreasing the burden of negotiating deliverables again and again. These grants are critical for supporting the core capacity in the field;
- Allow room for your grantees to engage in trial and error, **conducting experiments** that contribute to growth and better outcomes, even though some will fail;
- **Be more innovative** yourself – move away from traditional grantmaking structures and find other ways to support narrative change in movements, such as social enterprise investments and utilizing more intermediaries who are part of the field;
- **Step back, and only step in** where you have unique power and opportunity and where your partners are asking for your support; and
- Don't build a new infrastructure to support narrative change, or build up your own infrastructure, but instead help to **embed narrative change capacity in existing social movements and coalitions**. The need for strong, established relationships and multi-purpose coalitions was emphasized by many stakeholders.

### In Their Words

“Trust us, trust our strategy, trust our ability to do this. You know, test us, let us be accountable for the things that we're doing, but give us enough runway to try and build different planes and see if they'll take off as opposed to saying to us 'I'll fund the wheel on the plane. I'm really interested in the wheel.’”  
*Joseph Phelan, ReFrame Mentorship*

“Follow the lead of those organizations closest to the pain.” *Discussion Group*

“It's hard to take time out to talk about ideology and what we need to shift, given capacity and time constraints. Instead we're driven to complete deliverables because of funding approaches that encourage this.” *Jung Hee Choi, Power California*

“Structural expectations from funders hinder innovation and autonomy of organizations/movements.”  
*Discussion Group*

“Tread lightly so it doesn't distort the situation. Invest in a way that contributes to impact and outcomes.”  
*Discussion Group*

“It is important that funders invest in existing infrastructure, not create their own new 'hubs' for communications. Instead, strengthen local networks that can support narrative change.” *Anonymous*

“Funder imposed barriers are real. Meaningful, transformative relationships take time to build (and resources) and often are not possible with short-term and limited support.” *Discussion Group*

To TCE specifically, interviewees also asked that the endowment **let go of the focus on common messages** (e.g. “Health for All”) and shift to a focus on shared narratives, as well as seek to raise up the voices of individuals in communities, instead of the voices of consultants and staff hired to lead or direct the work.

### Funders’ Role in Evaluation & Learning

Many interviewees and discussion participants also had very direct feedback about how TCE and other funders could approach evaluation differently. Many ideas were shared that represent, collectively, a move away from pre-defined outcomes and metrics and a move toward more emergent approaches and grantee-led evaluation. They pointed out that metric-driven approaches can result in decisions that limit the creativity of campaigns, limit the number of voices in the campaign, and fail to see many of the things in the campaign that mattered, but were not as measurable.

Participants want to see grant agreements that don’t predefine outcomes and associated metrics, learning processes that help learn from successes and failures, and a wider recognition of the non-linear process by which narratives are changed.

## Using the Report Findings

Phase III participants in the study reviewed the findings and identified with whom they need to be shared, in what ways, and for what purposes. Overwhelmingly, the most common response was **the need for funders of narrative change to understand the findings**. Participants envision board presentations or other leadership level dialogues, where the participants in the study speak to the findings, not the researchers or TCE staff who commissioned the study. To support this action, the report ends with an attachment: the findings most relevant to the decisions that funders make are grouped together for use with leadership, boards, and program staff.

Participants also identified **others engaged in narrative change work, TCE’s grantees, and their own staff** as audiences of the report. For some, this was about informally sharing the results with key partners, but for others, they wanted to see specific types of dialogues, such as between grantees and TCE program staff or between statewide and local partners, to discuss the findings and implications for the narrative change ecosystem. However, some participants did note that the report uses some language that is not fully accessible to all participants in the ecosystem. Webinars or other presentations might help make it more actionable for those audiences.

### In Their Words

“It is difficult to work together because of the narrowness of where funding is directed - this affects capacity too.”

*Discussion Group*

“We are asked for outcomes and concrete policies, and that’s important, but if TCE is going to invest in narrative change work, it has to know outcomes for narrative change aren’t like that.

Narrative change is a process that builds over time and requires power and resources to gain momentum. And there are powerful opposing narratives, often deeply entrenched culturally to contend with. Sometimes we advance, in some moments we advance a lot and sometimes we don’t.” *Jung Hee Choi, Power California*

“Trust based philanthropy is needed. If there is a belief that power is in the community, allow those orgs to use the resources to utilize their power and build it.”

*Mayra Alvarez, Children’s Partnership*

“What we do not want is for another report to be placed on a shelf but rather that there is an intentional investment in the organizations and in the work that needs to happen to ensure that there is actual narrative change in our society.” *Bamby Salcedo, The TransLatin@ Coalition*

“Position people who contributed to this study as experts and not findings of TCE.” *Discussion Group*

“Dialogues between statewide and local orgs with intentional discussion around the shared work.” *Discussion Group*

# NARRATIVE CHANGE FOR HEALTH & RACIAL EQUITY: EXPLORING CAPACITY & ALIGNMENT

## Highlights for Funders

In 2019 and 2020, The California Endowment (TCE) commissioned a study to understand the capacity needs and strengths in California related to narrative change to advance health and racial equity. Given the emergent nature of narrative change practices and the ecosystem, TCE recognized that it was critical to not define “capacity,” but rather explore it with participants across the ecosystem. The participatory design engaged narrative change leaders and power builders within California and nationally in shaping the study focus, data sources, and interpretation of results. Over 40 leaders participated across the three phases of the study, engaging in individual interviews and group discussions to share their experiences, explore emergent concepts, and jointly interpret the findings.

The full report explores many capacity needs. This attachment focuses on the findings most directly related to funders, as the study participants reported that funders are a critical audience for their insights and proposed actions. A study is only participatory, and not extractive, if the participants have an opportunity to inform how their words and knowledge are used to make decisions. Ideally this attachment will be brought to funding partners by and with the study participants as part of a conversation, not as a representation of their thinking.

## Actionable Insights for Funders

Study participants articulated a diverse array of approaches and ways of understanding narrative change. This is not surprising in an emergent field, where **there are no “best practices” or widely agreed upon ways of advancing change. Some organizations may participate in multiple approaches**, depending on campaigns and coalitions they are part of, the consultants that campaigns are working with, and the needs of the campaigns. **Each approach is distinct in how it centers different voices; the tools/tactics being used; how reach and impact are thought about; and even which capacities are priorities.** These approaches are **not in competition with each other**, so much as being representative of distinctions that currently exist in how narrative change is understood and deployed across these organizations.

The majority of study participants described their approaches to narrative change as being led by the communities most harmed by the current narratives (Approaches A and B in the table on the next page). Approach B achieves reach across geographies and communities using grassroots strategies while building alignment on shared narratives. Participants using Approach B were the most likely to describe success and optimism about future success related to aligning narratives across communities to drive larger scale change, most likely because they are doing this work already, in a variety of different community-driven ways.

In contrast, many campaigns in California have historically led with research (Approach C) and reported challenges with aligning narratives across communities. This research-led approach is often participatory, though not community-led in the same way as Approaches A and B. Study participants emphasized that these **approaches are not mutually exclusive**, but do serve different purposes and provide different types of value.

“Narrative change accelerates when a story of local struggle, rooted in place and community, joins a broader story of shared movement and experience.” *Bernice Shaw, CSS*

## NARRATIVE CHANGE FOR HEALTH & RACIAL EQUITY: EXPLORING CAPACITY & ALIGNMENT

Table 1. Four complementary approaches to narrative change

	Approach A	Approach B	Approach C	Approach D
Summary	Narrative change as embedded into a larger power building and organizing approach that centers the voices of their community members.	Centers the voice of community members while also actively working across many communities and building networks working on aligned narratives.	Research-driven process, which may include many organizations at the table, that engages communities to deploy messages, frames, and narratives.	Mix of research and community-driven processes, all oriented around policy change processes (narrative as a tool to change policy).
Voices Centered	Begins first and foremost with the voices of people in their communities. Audiences are often the community members.	Often begins with a central narrative focus, but centers the voices of each community within that focus. May seek to reach larger audiences than just the communities.	Begins with research using strategic communications tools like polling, focus groups, and message testing. Explicitly focuses on larger audiences and significant reach.	Centers policymakers as the audience to reach, often with community members as the storytellers.
Reach/ scale/ desired impact	Deeply focused on the needs of one or a couple communities.	Works across communities, seeking alignment on central narratives.	Explicit, central goal of reaching many people and broadly shifting narratives.	Prioritizes policy change as the primary outcome.

All four approaches are grappling with **the intersection of building power and changing narratives**, though what this means differs across approaches and interviewees, including:

- For some, power building is foundational and narrative is a strategy to build power;
- For others, narrative change is insufficient - narrative power is needed to drive meaningful changes.
- For Approach C, there is a tension between deploying resources to build power in communities to help change narratives and scaling the reach of narrative campaigns through other tactics that are less community-driven.

“The person with the most authentic voice is the person who can say that is my firsthand experience. Therefore, I can offer that story, but I can also say what I think would make it better.... one of the ways we build power is by giving people who are in closest proximity to the oppression the choice and the option to be able to use their experiences in their voice to make change.” *Shanelle Matthews, RadComms*

*Questions for Funders: What approaches are you investing in most significantly today? How are you supporting efforts to bridge across approaches? What barriers to advancing specific approaches or bridging across approaches might you unintentionally be creating?*

### Capacities that are Under-Resourced

Interviewees identified many different **capacities that organizations working on narrative change simply need more of** – some of which are needed across many organizations and some of which are needed only by a few organizations that can then share those capacities (Table 2, next page).

“For too long, we’ve just accepted that nonprofits don’t need narrative and communications capacity. But it is clear our investments in narrative change need to include those on the ground – local organizers, strategists and communicators – who are networked together.” *Jung Hee Choi, Power California*

## NARRATIVE CHANGE FOR HEALTH & RACIAL EQUITY: EXPLORING CAPACITY & ALIGNMENT

**Table 2. Critical narrative change capacities**

<u>Critical, but missing or insufficient:</u>	<u>Critical, but somewhat intangible:</u>	<u>Less critical, but missing:</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communications knowledge &amp; skills</li> <li>• Trauma support for storytellers</li> <li>• Understanding stories</li> <li>• Conducting research</li> <li>• Planning skills</li> <li>• Physical facilities</li> <li>• Rapid response capacity</li> <li>• Ethnic and community-controlled media</li> <li>• Cultural work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Capacity to take actions that spread positive narratives (where actions, not words, change the narrative)</li> <li>• Humility, recognizing narrative change expertise as critical, but not the only expertise</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Influencing the institutions (schools, museums, gov) where narratives are reinforced</li> <li>• Disseminating stories/narratives on TV/radio</li> </ul>

Specific to communications capacity, grassroots-focused organizations largely **did not want more communications capacity via new staff** with specialized roles (preferring capacity be built across existing staff and deeply embedded in the organization), while organizations focused on network and coalition building called out the **need for more dedicated communications staff**, including in grassroots organizations.

Many participants are interested in various types of shared infrastructure, particularly around communications capacity or other narrative capacities, including via **multi-organization “hubs”** for narrative change, shared technology access, shared communications expertise, and infrastructure to help amplify narratives.

“Storytelling happens in all these different forms: in dance and music and theater and visual art... narrative means a story and that means storytellers/cultural workers.” *Anonymous*

**Specific Capacity that is Over-Resourced:** Participants consistently held a strong point of view about their desired role for how national communications firms show up in California’s narrative change work: **they want to see less involvement, less funding, and more investment in communities.** They do not believe these firms share their values, bring enough value for the cost, offer relevant products, or build local capacity. They asked that smaller, more value-aligned firms be engaged instead, and only for the specific skills not available in communities.

“Stop paying for expensive comms firms disconnected from the community who ‘hoard’ resources, knowledge, and contacts.” *Anonymous*

*Questions for Funders: Which capacities are you investing in now and how? Who makes decisions about which capacities you’ll support? How might this look different in the future?*

### Feedback for How Funders Support & Show Up

While the interview questions did not ask for feedback about how funders are supporting narrative change, all of the interviewees offered insights about how funders can change their behaviors in order to better support narrative change work. At the center of how study participants reflected on the role of funders in narrative change was one core message: **step back, release control, and trust us.** Trust in the people in communities leading this work; trust the partnerships that exist already; trust the messages that emerge from communities; step back and give room for communities to have power.

“Trust-based philanthropy is needed. If there is a belief that power is in the community, allow those orgs to use the resources to utilize their power and build it.” *Mayra Alvarez, Children’s Partnership*

## NARRATIVE CHANGE FOR HEALTH & RACIAL EQUITY: EXPLORING CAPACITY & ALIGNMENT

At a practical level, study participants had advice on what it looks like to step back and trust grantees, including:

- **Put trust in the processes that you fund**, in order to generate outcomes that you can support, instead of holding power over the outcomes;
- **Support communities** to advance narrative change, rather than investing in communications firms to identify narratives and produce messages;
- **Support more narrative change capacity**, including communications staff, amplification, and rapid response;
- Offer this support in ways that are less directive, less likely to trigger competition among narrative change organizations, and less focused on funder priorities (more **focused on grassroots priorities**);
- **Allow the time** for collaborative processes – let them move at the speed of trust;
- **Offer flexibility**. Ideally, provide general operating grants, decreasing the burden of negotiating deliverables again and again. These grants are critical for supporting the core capacity in the field.
- Allow room for your grantees to engage in trial and error, **conducting experiments** that contribute to growth and better outcomes, even though some will fail;
- **Be more innovative** yourself – move away from traditional grantmaking structures and find other ways to support narrative change in movements, such as social enterprise investments and utilizing more intermediaries who are part of the field;
- **Step back, and only step in** where you have unique power and opportunity and where your partners are asking for your support; and
- Don't build a new infrastructure to support narrative change, or build up your own infrastructure, but instead help to **embed narrative change capacity in existing social movements and coalitions**. The need for strong, established relationships and multi-purpose coalitions was emphasized by many stakeholders.

“Trust us, trust our strategy, trust our ability to do this. You know, test us, let us be accountable for the things that we're doing, but give us enough runway to try and build different planes and see if they'll take off as opposed to saying to us 'I'll fund the wheel on the plane. I'm really interested in the wheel.'”  
*Joseph Phelan, ReFrame Mentorship*

“Tread lightly so it doesn't distort the situation. Invest in a way that contributes to impact and outcomes.”  
*Discussion Group*

### *Funders' Role in Evaluation & Learning*

Study participants shared many ideas that represent, collectively, a move away from predefined outcomes and metrics and a move toward more emergent approaches and grantee-led evaluation. They believe metric-driven approaches can result in decisions that limit the creativity of campaigns, limit the number of voices in the campaign, and fail to see many of the things in the campaign that mattered, but were not as measurable.

Participants want to see grant agreements that don't predefine outcomes and associated metrics, learning processes that help learn from successes and failures, and a wider recognition of the non-linear process by which narratives are changed.

*Questions for Funders: What specific steps could you take to “release control” to your grantees and the field of narrative change leaders in California? Are there any practices recommended by the interviewees that you are ready to let go of or any you're ready to add?*