

"*Re:Imagining Change* is worthy of praise. As an introduction to story-based strategy, the book offers organizers and advocates a new and necessary way to understand and transform the impact of stories on our public life."

~ Malkia Cyril, Director, Center for Media Justice

"Our stories are powerful enough to change the world—if you believe. *SmartMeme's Re:Imagining Change* will give you the tools and confidence to unleash the power of the stories that live in your community and make the dream of 'another world is possible,' a reality."

~Robby Rodriguez, Executive Director of the SouthWest Organizing Project and co-author of *Working Across Generations: Defining the Future of Non-profit Leadership*

"Once upon a time, left-wing activists thought being right was good enough, but the past decade has seen a more elegant and effective understanding that you need to be a lot more if you want to win. *SmartMeme's* guidebook to being that *more*—smarter, more engaging, more subversive, more powerful—should be in every activist's hands and imagination. It's a great toolkit for change."

~Rebecca Solnit, author of *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster* and *Hope in the Dark: Untold Stories, Wild Possibilities*

"Brilliant and invaluable... Lakoff introduced the progressive movement to the power of framing. Canning and Reinsborough take framing to a far more powerful level and provide practical tools essential to the success of every progressive organization that seeks to bring forth a world of peace and justice. It gets my highest recommendation."

~David Korten, board chair, *YES! Magazine* and author *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community* and *Agenda for a New Economy*

"*SmartMeme's Re:Imagining Change* is such an incredible resource! This is a book to consume, to go over meticulously, mark up, share with friends, and keep within arm's reach on the shelf. The format is so accessible, the analysis and case studies show how important their groundbreaking story-based strategy is for all of the work we're doing. Ruckus wants every group we work with to grab this book!"

~Adrienne Maree Brown, Executive Director, The Ruckus Society

Re:Imagining Change

How to Use Story-based Strategy to Win Campaigns, Build Movements, and Change the World

Patrick Reinsborough & Doyle Canning



PM Press

We dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate, and love by narrative.

~ Barbara Hardy

2. Narrative Power Analysis

2.1 We Are Made of Stories

There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside of you.
~ Zora Neale Hurston

We live in a world shaped by stories. Stories are the threads of our lives and the fabric of human cultures. A story can unite or divide people(s), obscure issues, or spotlight new perspectives. A story can inform or deceive, enlighten or entertain, or even do all of the above.

As humans, we are literally hardwired for narrative. Harvard University evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker argues that stories are essential to human learning and building relationships in social groups. There is growing consensus in the scientific community that the neurological roots of both storytelling and enjoyment of stories are tied to our social cognition.¹

In one widely cited 1944 experiment, psychologists Fritz Heider and Mary-Ann Simmel showed subjects “an animation of a pair of triangles and a circle moving around a square,” and asked what was happening. The subjects’ responses (e.g. “The circle is chasing the triangles.”) revealed how they mapped a narrative onto the shapes. Numerous subsequent studies have reiterated how humans, as social creatures, see stories everywhere.²

Just as we tell ourselves stories about the world we live in, stories also tell us how to live. A myth is “a traditional story accepted as history that serves to explain the worldview of a people.”³ Myths

Just as our bodies are made of blood and flesh, our identities are made of narratives.

may be mistakenly dismissed as folktales from long ago, but even today a sea of stories tell us who we are, what to do, and what to believe.

People use stories to process the information we encounter from our families and upbringing, educational institutions, religious and cultural institutions, the media, our peers and community. We remember our lived experiences by converting them to narratives and integrating them into our personal and collective web of stories. Just as our bodies are made of blood and flesh, our identities are made of narratives.

2.2 Narrative Power Analysis

Those who do not have power over the story that dominates their lives, the power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change, truly are powerless, because they cannot think new thoughts.

~ Salman Rushdie

In order to make systemic social changes, **change agents** must understand the histories and institutions that underlie contemporary social systems, as well as how these histories and institutions shape culture and ways of collectively making meaning.

For example, imagine the following flashback to grade-school geography:⁴

Q: What is the definition of a continent?

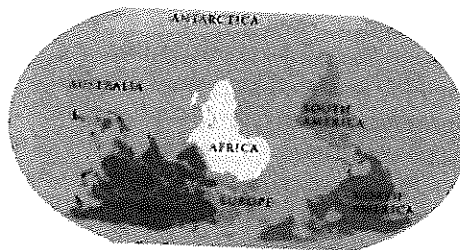
A: A large landmass surrounded by water.

Q: And how many continents are there?

A: Seven.

Sound familiar?

A geographical map also provides information about the mental maps and cultural assumptions of the people who made it.



Re:Imagining Change

Let's take another look. With the definition "a large landmass surrounded by water," and allowing that the Americas are two separate continents, there still seems to be one continent that doesn't quite qualify. Apparently Europe as a geographical area has different rules than the rest! It is neither large nor actually surrounded by water. So who made the rules about continents and defined the orientation of the modern map? Maybe Europeans?

A map is a tool to navigate the physical world, but it is also an expression of the deeper shared mental maps a culture provides to understand the world. This is one example of how the history of European colonization continues to influence the way we collectively see. Historic power relations—the social, economic, and political forces of the past—can continue to shape how we understand the present, which in turn impacts our imagination of the future.

SmartMeme describes culture as a matrix of shared mental maps that define how we collectively create meaning and understand the world around us. Inevitably, popular culture is an ever-evolving, contested space of struggle, where competing voices, experiences, and perspectives fight to answer the questions: Whose maps determine what is meaningful? Whose stories are considered "true"?

In order to make systemic social changes, change agents must understand the histories and institutions that underlie contemporary social systems, as well as how these histories and institutions shape culture

REFLECTIONS: STORYTELLING

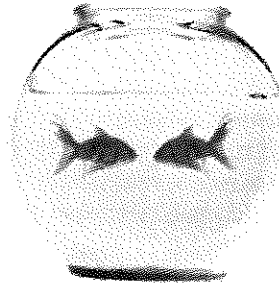
Name stories

- ▶ What is your full name?
- ▶ Why is that your name? Tell the story.

Myths

- ▶ Are there myths, stories, fables, or tall tales that you were told as a child? Choose one and retell the story.
- ▶ Where did it come from (family stories, religious texts, elders, movies, books, etc)?
- ▶ Are there lessons you draw from this story?
- ▶ How does it impact your life today?

When discussing culture, media theorist Marshall McLuhan often reminded his students, "We don't know who discovered water, but we can assume it wasn't a fish."



Whether you call them stories, cosmologies, myths, meta-narratives, the status quo, or some other word,⁵ it is clear that powerful stories can shape and inform how we see the world.

As certain ideas, practices, and worldviews become normalized over time, they form a **dominant culture** that disproportionately represents powerful institutional interests and perpetuates the stories that validate their political agendas. These stories can become invisible as they are passed from generation to generation—carrying assumptions that become “conventional wisdom.”

Many of our current social and ecological problems have their roots in the silent consensus of assumptions that shape the **dominant culture**: *Humans can dominate and outsmart nature. Women are worth less than men. Racism and war are part of human nature. U.S. foreign policy benevolently spreads democracy and liberation around the world...*

To make real and lasting social change...these stories must change.

A **narrative power analysis** recognizes that humans understand the world and our role in it through stories, and thus all power relations have a narrative dimension. Likewise, many stories are imbued with power. This could be the power to explain and justify the status quo or the power to make change imaginable and urgent.

A narrative analysis of power encourages us to ask: Which stories define cultural norms? Where did these stories come from? Whose stories were ignored or erased to create these norms? What new stories can we tell to more accurately describe the world we see? And, perhaps most urgently, what are the stories that can help create the world we desire?

Narrative power analysis starts with the recognition that the currency of story is not necessarily truth, but rather meaning. In other words, we often believe in a story not necessarily because

it is factually true; we accept a story as true because it connects with our values, or is relevant to our experiences in a way that is compelling.

The role of narrative in rendering meaning in our minds is what makes story a powerful force. These power dynamics operate both in terms of our individual identities—whether or not you get to determine your own story—and on the larger cultural level: Which stories are used to make meaning and shape our world? For example, which individuals, groups, or nations are portrayed as heroic—and whose story is presented as villainous, weak, or just irrelevant?

These questions show the narrative dimensions of the physical relationships of power and privilege, the unequal access to resources, and denials of self-determination that shape contemporary society. Asking these questions is key to bringing a **narrative power analysis** into social change work.

2.3 Power and Mythology

Myths which are believed in tend to become true.

~ George Orwell

Just as activists apply a power analysis to understand relations between key decision makers and relevant institutions, activists can apply a **narrative power analysis** to understand the narratives shaping an issue, campaign, or specific social context.

Narrative power analysis provides a framework to extend power analysis into **narrative space**—the intangible realm of stories, ideas, and assumptions that frame and define the situation, relationships or institutions in question.

Narratives can often function as a glue to hold the legitimacy of power structures in place and maintain the status quo. When working for social change, it is essential to understand specifically how these narratives operate.

For example, when confronted with ongoing injustice, some people will say, “that’s just the way things are.” In this **dominant culture** narrative, politicians, generals, and corporate executives have power but the rest of us don’t. This is one of the

Narrative power analysis starts with the recognition that the currency of story is not necessarily truth, but rather meaning.

most common assumptions that normalizes existing power dynamics and makes them appear unchangeable.

But **people-powered** movements around the world have shown us that *power is a relationship*; it is a malleable and dynamic relationship between those who have more power and those who have less. The “consent theory of power,” popularized by Gene Sharp,⁶ posits that power structures are inherently unstable and propped up by societal institutions that are operated by rulers with the tacit consent of the ruled. When the governed remove their consent or obedience from the power holders, dramatic changes can happen.

This has been the story of countless organizing campaigns and nonviolent revolutions around the world from the resistance to legalized segregation in the Southern United States to the overthrow of dictatorships in the Philippines, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and several former Soviet Republics.

Social change history can be interpreted as a struggle between collaborative power (“power-with” or “power-together”) and coercive power (“power-over”). When grassroots movements mobilize and make change by uniting people to challenge the coercive power of an illegitimate and oppressive authority, this is a clear contest between collaborative power-with and coercive power-over.

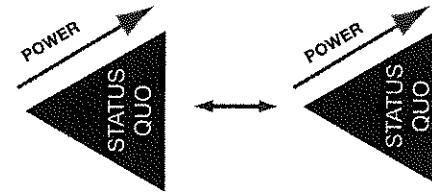
It is easy to see coercive power in its most physical forms: the policeman’s gun, the invading army’s tanks, or the economic coercion when the boss threatens to fire anyone who supports a union drive. In many cases it is harder to see coercive power when it is operating as narrative.

In the 1930s, the imprisoned Italian Communist leader Antonio Gramsci developed the concept of **hegemony** (coming from the Greek word *hegemonia*, meaning leadership) to describe how the elite don’t just physically rule society, but, more importantly, they define society’s moral and intellectual leadership. Capitalism, Gramsci suggested, maintained control not just through violence and economic coercion, but also ideologically, through a hegemonic culture in which the values of the elite became the “common sense values of all.”⁷ The power of **hegemony** is expressed through coercion and consent rather than through armed force. This multifaceted cultural process limits the terms of the debate to make ideas that challenge the status quo almost unthinkable.

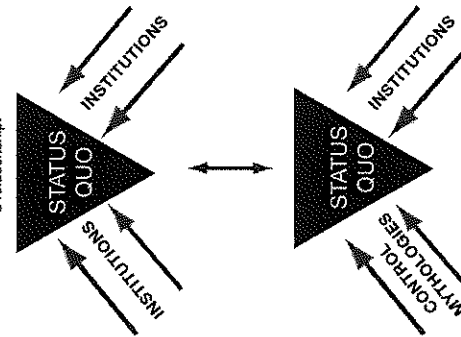
Hegemony operates in cultural stories that over time gain widespread acceptance and reinforce a dominant perspective or

Consent Theory of Power

CONVENTIONAL MODEL
Status quo as stable pyramid: Elites rule masses. Power is fixed and change is impossible.



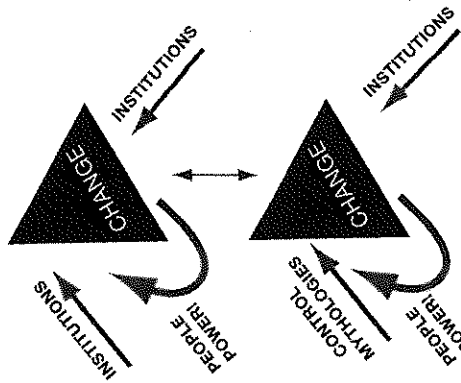
CONSENT MODEL
Status quo as unstable pyramid: Institutions prop up power structure and operate on mass consent. Power is a relationship.



CONVENTIONAL MODEL
Status quo’s “conventional wisdom” is unchangeable. Control mythologies are inviolabilized. Power-over is normalized as “the way things are.”

CONSENT MODEL
Status quo as unstable. Control mythologies create consent and prop up power structure by legitimizing institutions and status quo.

PEOPLE POWER
People mobilize to revoke consent from the institutions that prop up the status quo. Structural change occurs.



CHANGING THE STORY
Control mythologies are exposed and assumptions are challenged, making the status quo untenable. People-power mobilizing narrative offers a new story. When stories change... power can shift.

Narrative Power Analysis

worldview. These webs of narratives are **control mythologies**, which shape a shared sense of political reality, normalize the status quo, and obscure alternative options or visions.

Referring to these stories as “mythologies” is not about whether they are true or false—again, it is about how much meaning they carry in the culture. Like religious mythologies (both ancient and contemporary), these stories are powerful in that they give people a lens for interpreting and understanding the world. Some myths evolve over time carrying harmful assumptions of hegemonic culture, while others are specifically designed to manipulate for a particular political purpose.

From the notion that “You can’t fight city hall” to the idea that our economies must always “grow,” **control mythologies** often operate as the boundaries of political imagination and shape the **dominant culture**. This impacts not only the political education work of social change movements, but also our own activist imaginations. By noticing and analyzing **control mythologies**, we can reeducate ourselves and re-imagine our world.

2.4 Creation Myths of the United States

Thanksgiving is the holiday of peace, the celebration of work and the simple life...

~ Ray Stannard Baker, 1919

We gave them forest-clad mountains and valleys full of game, and in return what did they give our warriors and our women? Rum, trinkets, and a grave. Where today are the Pequot? Where are the Narragansett, the Mohican, the Pokanoket, and many other once powerful tribes of our people? They have vanished before the avarice and the oppression of the White Man, as snow before a summer sun...

~ Tecumseh (Shawnee Leader), 1810

The Thanksgiving story is a snapshot of rosy relations between European colonizers and the native peoples of the Americas that emphasizes cooperation, peace, and the native peoples welcoming the Pilgrims.

However, as many of us know, that was not the reality. In fact, the first historical record of colonists celebrating a “thanksgiving” is not related to a harvest festival or to the idea of cross-



Thanksgiving is one of the most recognizable origin myths and cultural rituals of the United States. It operates as a powerful control mythology in the dominant culture.

cultural cooperation, but to a celebration of a massacre of over 700 Pequot women and children in 1637. The late-November date (which is six to eight weeks after harvest in New England) appears to commemorate the anniversary of the massacre, which was seen as a great military victory.⁸

This example reveals key aspects of a **narrative power analysis**. First, that dominant stories in the culture—ones that are widely accepted as true—are often worth examining to understand what they really say and what they leave out, as well as the underlying assumptions that allow them to operate. In this case, one underlying assumption is that Europeans were a peaceful and welcome presence in the Americas.

Second, this example shows that power shapes point of view. Clearly the story of Thanksgiving that has been passed on in the **dominant culture** is from the perspective of the Pilgrims, and not the native peoples. As the famous saying goes, “History is written by the winners.”⁹

Third, the Thanksgiving story has universalized the Pilgrims’ perspective as the only truth and has normalized their experience. This universalization masks the realities of the genocide of native peoples, and the mythology continues to uphold white privilege today.

And finally, the **control mythology** of Thanksgiving is both challengeable and changeable. Since 1970 Native American activists and allies have marked Thanksgiving as the “National Day of Mourning” to draw attention to the genocide of native peoples and their ongoing struggles against racism and colonization. A group called the United American Indians of New England organizes an annual demonstration at Plymouth Rock

in Massachusetts. In recent years, through grassroots and legal pressure, the group has even won several commemorative plaques acknowledging the Day of Mourning and native historical figures.¹⁰

Dominant stories in the culture—ones that are widely accepted as true—are often worth examining to understand what they really say and what they leave out, as well as the underlying assumptions that allow them to operate.

Thanksgiving is a central origin story of the United States, but there are many others: from “Columbus discovered America,” to “the land of the free,” “40 acres and a mule,” and “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” These origin myths tell believers who we are, where we come from, and what we stand for as a country. These mythologies shape the terrain of our contemporary narratives. Un-

derstanding how these origin stories and their (often contradictory) histories impact our social change efforts today is an essential part of winning tangible victories.

EXERCISES: NARRATIVE POWER

Control Mythologies

- ◆ Is there a control mythology you once believed, but now question, challenge, or refute?
- ◆ When did you start to challenge the conventional story?
- ◆ Was there a person, incident, media piece, or experience that led you to question your existing beliefs?
- ◆ What lessons do you draw from this experience?

Filters

- ◆ Have you heard a piece of information (on the news, from a friend, etc) that you did not believe?
- ◆ Why didn't you? Take a moment to write down some of your own narrative filters for information.
- ◆ What makes you believe? Disbelieve?

NARRATIVE POWER ANALYSIS

- ◆ Examine dominant-culture stories
- ◆ Consider how power shapes point of view of the story
- ◆ Explore how the story normalizes the status quo by universalizing certain experiences and invisibilizing oppression
- ◆ Overcome filters: It's not what people **don't** know, but what they **do** know

2.5 Filters vs. Facts

There's a world of difference between truth and facts. Facts can obscure the truth.

~ Maya Angelou

A **narrative power analysis** is not only useful for identifying and challenging **control mythologies**. It is also an important framework for **change agents** creating a strategy to reach people with a message.

Many activists spend a lot of time telling people about what's going wrong in the community and trying to persuade them to take action for change. Have you ever tried to convince people (who didn't already agree with you) about a social issue by telling them “the facts”? Did you tell them all the statistics and data about your cause, and they still didn't change their mind?

You're not alone.

It is easy to define the problem as “the general public doesn't know the facts.” Oftentimes activists assume that if we could just inform people about the issue and give them the information they are lacking, then they would join our movements for change. But, in most cases, “the facts” alone are not enough to persuade; assumptions, emotions, internal narratives, and pre-existing attitudes can get in the way of the facts making sense.

A **narrative power analysis** suggests that the problem is not necessarily what people **don't** know (the facts). Rather, the problem may be what they **do** know (underlying assumptions).

In other words, people have existing stories about their world

Current estimates are that the average person in an urban or suburban area in the U.S. is subjected to 3,000 commercial messages daily.

that may act as **narrative filters** to prevent them from hearing social change messages. As years of psychological study have shown us, people are conditioned to ignore information that doesn't fit into their existing framework for understanding the world (often called "confirmation bias"). These biases are deep enough that we can even track our neurological pathways of denial. As Drew Weston explains in his book, *The Political Brain*:

When confronted with potentially troubling political information, a network of neurons becomes active that produces distress...The brain registers the conflict between data and desire and begins to search for ways to turn off the spigot of unpleasant emotion.¹¹

Information that contradicts our existing beliefs is rarely able to reach through the filters of people's pre-existing assumptions. The big challenge is that these filters are frequently rooted in the **dominant culture's control mythologies**.

So how does a movement challenge those assumptions and shift a story in the **dominant culture**? This question is central to developing a **story-based strategy**. A **narrative power analysis** can help us:

1. Understand the story we are trying to change.
2. Identify the underlying assumptions that allow that story to operate as truth.
3. Find the **points of intervention** in the story where we can challenge, change, and/or insert a new story.

2.6 Designer Stories and the Branded World

Advertising at its best is making people feel that without their product you're a loser.

~ Nancy Shalek

Human hardwiring for stories comes from our deepest impulses as social creatures who want to build connection in community. What does this mean in a wired, **branded**, and globalized world? Understanding **narrative power** is even more critical in the contemporary cultural context, where **advertising** and marketing have become central engines of the economy. Despite the

impact of the global recession Global advertising revenues are still projected to reach \$450 billion in 2010.¹²

The vast majority of messages that are circulating in the mass media are created with the specific purpose of affecting the thinking, behavior, and purchasing habits of the target audience. These are designer stories created by some of the world's most talented creative minds.

The U.S. **dominant culture** is increasingly shaped by multimedia, consumer **spectacles**, and other sophisticated forms of advertising that attempt to penetrate our most personal desires and relationships. Current estimates are that the average person in an urban or suburban area in the U.S. is subjected to 3,000 commercial messages daily. Not surprisingly, recent studies have found that two-thirds of Americans feel "constantly bombarded" by ads, and nearly as many respondents felt that these ads have "little or no relevance to them."¹³

This commercialized media assault targets all consumers regardless of age. The Federal Trade Commission estimates that in the year 2004 children ages 2-11 saw about 25,600 television advertisements. This equals roughly 10,700 minutes (the equivalent of over a full week of non-stop viewing) of TV advertising a year. For comparison, adults saw approximately 52,500 ads and 22,300 minutes of advertising.¹⁴

Numerous studies have shown that young children are not able to distinguish between commercials and TV programs and are thus unable to recognize that commercials are trying to sell them something.¹⁵ Other studies

Marlboro used the cowboy image and mythology to create their brand. The "Marlboro Man" campaign began in the 1950s (when filtered cigarettes were most popular with women), and succeeded in dramatically increasing Marlboro's male market share.





1931 Coca-Cola advertisement with illustration by Haddon Sundblom.

have shown that children as young as age two can be influenced by **branding**, and by age three they can recognize brand logos.¹⁶ This awareness has driven marketers to target children at increasingly young ages and use the “nag factor” to manipulate children into pressuring their parents to purchase things. Now children are literally targeted from birth by

sophisticated manipulation techniques designed to create a consumer identity at the earliest possible age.

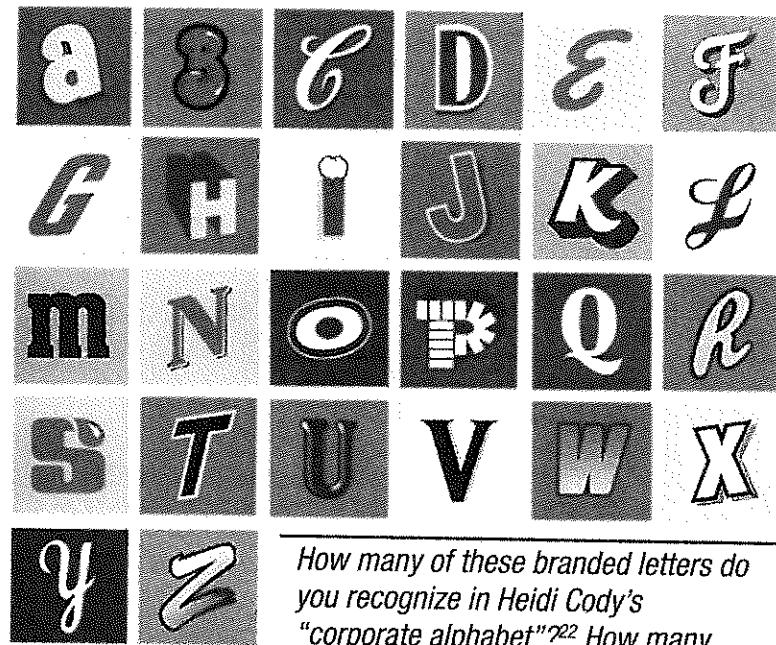
Our society has essentially submitted to a mass psychological experiment that is increasingly defining the values of **popular culture** as individualism and consumerism. Media theorist and researcher Sut Jhally has described advertising as providing “the dream life of our culture” that sells us products by selling us dreams.¹⁷ Author Stephen Duncombe has coined the phrase “The Age of Fantasy” to describe how image and **spectacle** shape contemporary society and politics.¹⁸

The influence of advertising is not new, and advertising has historically played a key role in shaping U.S. **popular culture**. One example: the contemporary image of Santa Claus (the jovial white-bearded man in the red suit) is the result of a successful advertising campaign by the Coca-Cola company that began in the 1930s. The **branding** process created a dominant image of Santa clothed in Coke’s red and white colors that replaced a diverse range of other depictions coming from a range of Northern European traditions.¹⁹

Another example is the decades old branding strategy of the De Beers diamond company. In the 1930s and 1940s, De Beers sought product placement in movies with romantic engagement scenes to popularize the offering of a diamond ring as THE engagement ritual, and to equate the desire for life partnership with

the symbol of a large diamond. Within a few decades, diamond engagement rings became the norm and “diamonds are forever” became part of the cultural vernacular. This campaign is considered by the industry to be one of the most successful advertising campaigns in U.S. history.²⁰

Branding operates like a magical process where a thing—usually an inanimate product, but sometimes an idea, candidate, or political agenda—is endowed with specific narrative and emotional qualities. The expression comes from the Greek and Roman penal system where criminals had markings representing their crimes burned onto their flesh.²¹ Modern **branding** metaphorically burns emotional and narrative qualities into a thing so as to create in the customer (or target audience) an inseparable



How many of these branded letters do you recognize in Heidi Cody’s “corporate alphabet”?²² How many logos do you think you can recognize? Compare that to the number of non-edible plant species you can name. Or U.S. state capitals? Or perhaps the number of North American indigenous nations?

recognition. The brand is not merely a logo, color scheme, or specific flagship product. The brand is the sum total of the stories that are told about the branded entity and encompasses images, impressions, gut feelings, and associations.

Branding is one of the ways that **narrative power** is experienced, referenced, and discussed. But the popular discourse around **branding** frequently lacks a critical power analysis.

The “corporate alphabet” by artist Heidi Cody is instructive. One letter is enough to cue your mind to a specific product and possibly an entire narrative about it. Let’s remember these aren’t even logos—these are just snippets of the font treatments of the product names. Y is for York Peppermint Patties (and makes you feel cold like you’re in the mountains), C is for Campbell’s Soup (“Mmm Mmm good!”) and J is for Jell-O (Bill Cosby saying, “J-E-L-L-O!”).

How did these advertising images and stories get inside of our heads? How do some stories spread and saturate popular culture while others are ignored? This is the power of memes.

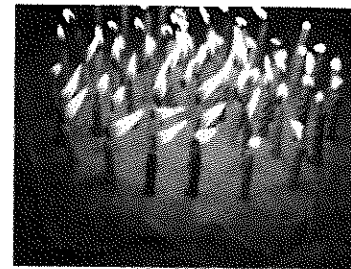
2.7 Memes

“Just as in the game of ‘Telephone’ (where a message is whispered from person to person, being slightly mis-replicated each time), selection favors the memes which are easiest to understand, to remember, and to communicate to others... Rather than debate the inherent ‘truth’ or lack of “truth” of an idea, memetics is largely concerned with how that idea gets itself replicated.

Memetics is vital to the understanding of cults, ideologies, and marketing campaigns of all kinds, and it can help to provide immunity from dangerous information-contagions. You should be aware, for instance, that you’ve just been exposed to the Meta-meme, the meme about memes...”²³

~ Glenn Grant

The concept of a **meme** is a helpful analytical tool for exploring cultural influence and the ways in which **narrative power** operates. **Memes** are self-replicating units of cultural information that spread virally from person to person and generation to generation, with a life of their own. The term **meme** rhymes with “dream.” It is derived from a Greek word meaning “to imitate,” and was coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in 1976. Dawkins created the word **meme** as an analogy to the word



Memes (pronounced “meems”) are units of self-replicating cultural information such as slogans (Just Do It!), iconic images that can be easily referenced (Abu Ghraib torture), catch phrases (“wardrobe malfunction”), symbols (the peace sign), or rituals (candles on a birthday cake). Memes can act as capsules for stories to spread virally through cultures.

REFLECTIONS MEMES

My Memes

- ◆ Are there favorite slang words, fashions, ideas, slogans, or rituals that you've "picked up," practiced, and spread?
- ◆ Have you been a "carrier" for a new (to you) meme lately?
- ◆ Are there memes that you don't want to spread?

Movement Memes

- ◆ What are some of the memes of the social movements that you are a part of or of campaigns that you support?

"gene," as a way to explain how cultural practices spread. A **meme** is any unit of culture that has spread beyond its creator—buzz words, catchy melodies, fashion trends, ideas, rituals, images, and the like. Writer and memeticist Glen Grant defines **memes** as "contagious information patterns."²⁴

At *smartMeme* we think of a **meme** as a capsule for a story to spread. If you want to challenge and transform the **dominant culture** and spread new ideas, you need some vocabulary to talk about the units of culture, and analyze how stories spread, stick, morph,

MOVEMENT MEMES

The term meme may be new(ish), but spreading memes is an age-old movement building practice. In many ways, the defining manifestation of a social movement is the emergence of a common story that allows people to express their shared values and act with a common vision. These stories are encapsulated into memes—slogans, symbols, and rituals—that can spread throughout culture:

No taxation without representation	Green jobs
A raised fist	Greenwashing
Peace sign	Media justice
Si se puede!	Ms.
Human rights	The Great Bear Rainforest
Living wage	Separation of oil and state
Environmental racism	Climate justice
Fair trade	

and change. **Mememes** are rapidly fertilized and cross-pollinated in today's 24/7 multimedia environment. As **change agents** we need ways to track how information spreads and shapes political discourse.²⁵

Mememes are everywhere, from personal mannerisms and collective ritual to the advertising slogans and political jargon that dominate the media. Almost anything can be called a **meme**—but how effective a **meme** is it? Will it be a passing fad (pet rocks) or an ongoing cultural ritual (shaking hands)? Over time most **mememes** tend to morph, disappear, or even dramatically change in meaning, but some prove to be resilient and shape the evolution of cultures.

The concept of the **meme** as an analytical tool and metaphor is useful for understanding the contemporary context of **narrative power**: information saturation, 24-hour news cycles, non-stop marketing, and sophisticated government and corporate misinformation campaigns. However, that does NOT mean that a "magic meme" will ever replace real world struggle.

A well-tested sound byte or powerful image alone will not win campaigns or invoke systemic change. But the right **meme** CAN help our organizing become exponentially more effective. The **story-based strategy** approach is not intended to be a replacement for traditional organizing and movement building, but rather a set of complementary tools made all the more relevant by the contemporary cultural context.

2.8 Control Memes

If you believe certain words, you believe their hidden arguments.
~ The Open-Ended Proof from The Panoplia Prophetica

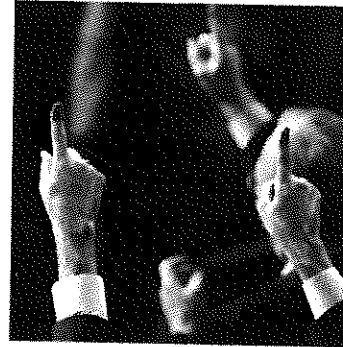
The concept of a **meme** can make our own storytelling more powerful and viral. It can also help us analyze the stories we are working to change in the **dominant culture**.

Advertising is full of powerful designer **mememes**—catchy little phrases that get endlessly repeated like Nike's swoosh and catch phrase "Just Do It!" Likewise, unscrupulous **power-holders**

A well-tested sound byte or powerful image alone will not win campaigns or invoke systemic change, but the right meme CAN help our organizing become exponentially more effective.

A designer control meme:

Republicans put purple ink on their fingers for Bush's 2005 State of the Union Address. The purple dye invoked the ink that was applied to Iraqi citizens' fingers at the polls after they cast their vote in the first election since the U.S. invasion. For Republicans, it served as a visual cue for the Bush administration's new "Freedom is on the March" story of U.S. foreign policy. This control meme was created in an attempt to re-justify a military invasion that had been exposed as an illegal operation based on lies—when the U.S. failed to discover weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.



have shown considerable skill at designing memes that carry their stories through the culture: "family values," "weapons of mass destruction," "the war on terror," "the liberal media," and "tax relief" have become part of the public discussion, carrying with them the worldview and assumptions of their creators.

When a designer meme acts as a container for control myths, or replicates oppressive stories and spreads them throughout the popular culture, smartMeme calls it a **control meme**. A control meme is created (or sometimes just exploited) to insert a status

CONTROL MEMES

Some of our favorite examples:

Manifest destiny	Surgical strike
Separate but equal	Islamofascism
The war on... (communism, drugs, terror)	The liberal media
Free trade	The P.A.T.R.I.O.T. Act
Death tax	Family values
Clean coal	Jobs versus the environment
No Child Left Behind	Too big to fail
Target of opportunity	Post-racial

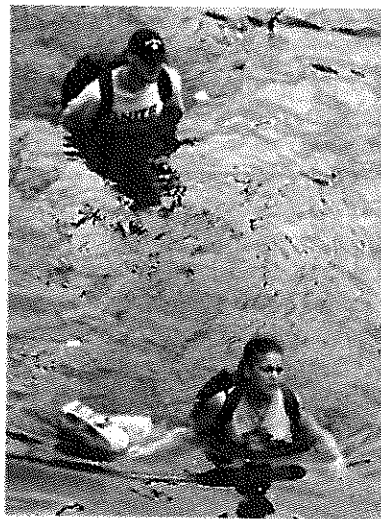
quo bias (or power-holders' perspective) into popular perceptions and shared cultural narratives. A **control meme** spreads a specific framing of an idea or situation that reinforces the status quo and/or relationships of power-over.

Some **control memes** are contemporary designer memes crafted by political spin advisors and PR flacks, such as "The Bush administration's War on Terror." Other **control memes** are the sound bites or buzzwords that mask histories of violence and oppression. For instance, "Columbus discovered America" is a neat control meme package for the story of the European colonization of the Americas. If the meme package for this story was "Columbus invaded America," then the story would be perceived differently.

Control meme is a name for a specific application of narrative power that succinctly marginalizes, co-opts, and limits the appeal of social change ideas. Many **control memes** are found in



Associated Press
Tue Aug 30, 11:31 AM ET
"A young man walks through chest deep floodwater after looting a grocery store in New Orleans on Tuesday, Aug. 30, 2005."



AFP/Getty Images/Chris Graythen
Tue Aug 30, 3:47 AM ET
"Two residents wade through chest-deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store after Hurricane Katrina came through the area in New Orleans, Louisiana."

the intergenerational cultural patterns of internalized racial superiority and inferiority²⁶ and in the rationalizations created by the **dominant culture** to justify patterns of oppression.

In the example (previous page) of media coverage of Hurricane Katrina, white people “find” resources at a local grocery store, while a black youth is described as “looting.” This is a racist **control mythology** in operation, neatly packaging an entire history of the criminalization and dehumanization of African Americans in the **meme** “loot.” This particular example became an internet **meme** of its own when media justice activists highlighted it as an example of racist media coverage.

2.9 Applying Narrative Power Analysis: Elements of Story

Truth and Power belong to those who tell a better story.
~ Stephen Duncombe

Telling a compelling social change story has many dimensions.²⁷ In order to apply a **narrative power analysis** and create effective **story-based strategies**, it is helpful to understand the key narrative elements that allow stories to operate. *SmartMeme’s* model is to examine five **elements of story** that we have found are particularly relevant for both analyzing and effectively communicating stories: Conflict, Characters, Imagery, Foreshadowing, and Assumptions. Identifying these elements helps us deconstruct the stories we want to challenge and to construct the stories we want to tell.

Conflict

Conflict is the backbone of narrative. This is what defines the drama and point of view of the story and makes it interesting. The conflict frames the narrative. No conflict, no plot, no story. What does the story present as the problem? How does the framing create conflict? Who are the good guys? Who are the bad guys? What is at stake?

Characters

Good stories have characters to which people can relate. This helps people see themselves reflected in the story and choose sides. Sometimes these characters are the subjects of the story and sometimes they are the protagonists, or even narrators, and act as

messengers that deliver the story. Messengers are just as important (if not more important) as the message itself, because they embody the message. Messengers put human faces on the conflict, and put the story in context. The institutional biases of the media often present politically marginalized people as being at fault for their own problems or as helpless victims, or do not let them speak at all. The dynamics of who gets to speak, how the “sympathetic” roles are cast, and who is represented as the heroes, victims, and villains, are key to the **battle of the story**, and the struggle for self-determination and media justice.

Imagery (Show Don’t Tell)

A picture is worth a thousand words. Today’s mass media culture is image driven and many stories are illustrated with carefully produced visuals. Effective stories use words to create powerful imagery that captures the imagination with metaphor, anecdote, and descriptions that speak to our senses. “Show don’t tell,” means that the story’s meaning or moral is shown to us rather than told to us. Effective stories communicate by connecting to what people already know and hold dear—our values. When a story is showing, instead of telling, it offers the audience the opportunity to use their own values to draw conclusions.

Identifying and challenging underlying assumptions is probably the most important element to changing a story.

Foreshadowing

Every story has a beginning, middle, and an end—the resolution of the conflict. The literary term “foreshadowing” refers to the ways that a story provides hints to its outcome. Think of the movie that slowly pans across the gun on the wall in an early scene. We are trained by narrative conventions to perceive that image as relevant information and we know it means the gun is going to return to the plot. Real-world narratives that shape culture and politics also foreshadow. When analyzing a narrative, look at how the story suggests a specific future or makes promises (explicit or otherwise) about the resolution of the conflict.

Assumptions

Assumptions make up the glue that holds the story together; they are the unstated parts of the story that you have to accept in order

to believe the narrative is true. Assumptions can take the form of shared values (a belief in democracy) or distorted information (Saddam Hussein is connected to 9/11). Often times **control myths** shape stories at the level of their unstated assumptions. Identifying and challenging underlying assumptions is probably the most important element to changing a story. Likewise, when we unearth the underlying assumptions of an activist campaign narrative, we can benefit from a shared understanding of the glue that holds the group together: our worldview and values.

REFLECTIONS: ELEMENTS OF STORY

Share a Story

Find a person willing to listen and recount a story about an embarrassing moment, a hectic morning, or a journey you've taken. You can also choose to share the origins of a personal object you have with you (like your shoes, keys, or jewelry).

Now, ask your listener to help you practice identifying the elements of story. What is the conflict? Who are the characters? What imagery was used and how was the ending foreshadowed? Are there underlying assumptions that make the story believable?

Moving Stories

Think of a story that you found moving (could be something you heard secondhand, a movie, a poem, a family story, from a book, etc.) and retell it. Why is it powerful for you? How does it use the elements of story? What are some of the underlying assumptions that resonate with you?

SmartMeme has created a tool—the **battle of the story** worksheet—to facilitate this process. The tool, available at *smart-Meme.org*, asks social change groups to examine the multiple sides (at least two) of the story they are trying to change using the five **elements of story**.

When deconstructing the **power-holder** or status quo story, the purpose of the exercise is not to explain what is true, but to tell the story *as it is told*. Oftentimes, this may involve a distorted perspective or even lies, but the goal is to understand how the story operates in order to change it. (Sometimes it helps to role-play a specific person such as the targeted **power-holder** or a company's public relations person.)

When constructing the **change agent** narrative in the **battle of the story** process, the purpose is to identify elements you are currently using, and brainstorm some new ways to tell the story. The process should be energizing for a group as new ideas come up in the exercise. Often a group will uncover new ways to frame their issue, surface the need to reach out to new groups who should be characters, explore new imagery, or gather insights on how to intervene in the dominant story. (Section IV explores interventions in depth.)

3.3 Framing the Conflict

In politics, whoever frames the debate tends to win the debate.
~ George Lakoff

Framing is a progressive buzzword, thanks in large part to the recent popularity of cognitive linguist George Lakoff's important work.³ The roots of the modern framing discourse are in the work of Erving Goffman and his 1974 book, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Goffman used the idea of frames to label "schemata of interpretation."⁴ In other words, the **frame** is the larger story that shapes the understanding of information, experiences, and messages.

Framing helps define a story by setting the terms for how to understand it. Like a frame around a piece of art or the edges of the television screen, the frame focuses and organizes our perception, drawing attention to what's within it. The frame defines what is part of the story and (often more importantly) what is not, both visually and cognitively. We make meaning from what is inside the frame and we ignore what is outside of it.

REFLECTIONS: INFORMATION WARFARE

"If you don't have goose bumps now, you will never have them in your life," gushed Fox News anchor David Asman as he described the toppling of the Saddam statue.⁶ However, the coverage from the international media presented a very different picture. British journalist and Middle East correspondent Robert Fisk, reporting for the U.K. *Independent* newspaper, described the toppled statue as "the most staged photo-opportunity since Iwo Jima."⁶ The reality soon became clear that the toppling of the Saddam statue was a successful U.S. information warfare operation that was intended to reinforce the Bush administration's story that the invasion would be quick and easy and that U.S. troops would be greeted as liberators. In subsequent years a fuller picture of the military's use of information warfare to shape U.S. public opinion of the invasion of Iraq has emerged. These operations have included the deliberate bombing of Arabic language satellite news stations *Al Jazeera* and *Al-Arabiya*, the targeting of unembedded media and a Pentagon-coordinated program to shape the message provided by retired military personnel serving as analysts for U.S. media outlets.⁷ The chilling implication is that U.S. public opinion has become a priority military target.⁸

Story-based strategy is a method for framing issues and designing campaigns. The five **elements of story** provide the scaffolding to construct a frame by offering a framework for what goes *inside* the frame.

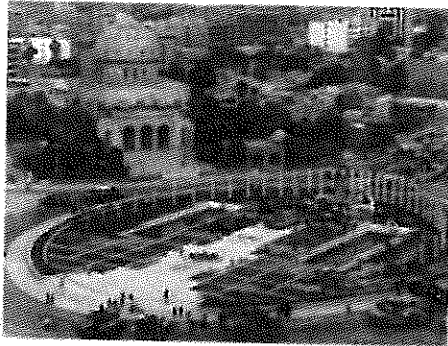
For *smartMeme*, **framing** is more than coming up with a catchy slogan. **Framing** is the task of designing a narrative complete with characters, conflicts, images, and foreshadowing that reinforces a good story and creates meaning for an audience.

We believe **framing** is an important concept because it is fundamentally about the issue of power in the story. **Story-based strategy** explores who does and does not have power in the story, with the aim of shifting power in the story. This interplay of power and representation is the essence of **framing** and **reframing**.

When U.S. troops arrived in central Baghdad, people in the United States saw the footage of throngs of Iraqis cheering as the statue of Saddam Hussein was toppled in Baghdad's central plaza. This image spread throughout the mainstream U.S. media as a symbol of the quick and decisive success of the U.S.-led invasion. The story was about liberation—a grateful civilian population rising up to overthrow a symbol of the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. The image gives us the impression of widespread support for the U.S. invasion. It also invokes the



Screen shot of CNN covering the arrival of U.S. troops in Baghdad's Firdos Square on April 9, 2003.



Coverage of the arrival of U.S. troops in Baghdad's Firdos Square on April 9, 2003, taken from the vantage point of the Palestine Hotel. Picture from the Reuters International News Wire.

iconic images from the end of the Cold War, as Soviet-era statues were pulled down across Russia and Eastern Europe.

Q: So who has the power in this story?

A: The Iraqi people, of course!

The second image is a picture of the same event, taken at almost the same time—shortly before the statue is toppled. We can see the small group gathered near the statue and 13 U.S. tanks surrounding the plaza. So, who has the power in this story?

Expanding the frame of the picture reframes the entire story and changes our understanding of who has the power.

While this is an extreme example, these two images provide a simple and effective visual definition of **framing**—you see what is inside the frame and you don't see what's outside it. When we reframe, we get a different interpretation of events. In order to change the story and change our understanding of the story's power dynamics, we often have to expand the frame or **reframe**.

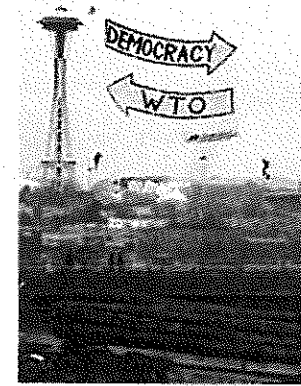
3.4 Creating Narrative Frames

Each man should frame life so that at some future hour fact and dreaming meet.

~ Victor Hugo

So, how do movements create **frames** to shift the popular understanding of important stories and issues? Social change efforts can help shape the interpretation of important events not by manipulating the physical frame on information (as the U.S. military has in Iraq), but rather by creating a narrative frame for our audiences to see an issue. One example is a **framing** action: an action designed to influence the audience's understanding of an unfolding narrative.

For example, the "WTO vs. Democracy" banner was an intervention on the day before massive protests shut down the World Trade Organization meeting in 1999. The action was intended to shape media coverage in the lead-up to the mass actions. The larger frame of democracy connected the issues of labor standards, environmental protection, and human rights. By providing an overarching message that the WTO is fundamentally undemocratic, the action offered the U.S. public a frame to understand why people were protesting and how the issue could affect them. Part of why this action was so effective as a narrative framing device was that the WTO was largely unknown to the U.S. public, so activists could define many people's first impressions without having to overcome preconceptions about the WTO.



Banner hung on Nov. 29, 1999, by the Ruckus Society and Rainforest Action Network in Seattle, the day before the mass protests shut down the World Trade Organization meeting.

Social change campaigns aren't usually framing new issues, but rather working to reframe existing ones. This means taking on the existing stories and control myths by challenging assumptions and shifting popular perception.