What would it take for narrative change work to have more real-world impact in the UK?

"HEARD

Foreword

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Creating a healthier world where everyone can have a good life means changing specific material conditions, policies and practices. But changing the world for the better and for the long term raises more fundamental questions: How do we design our societies? How do we treat and support each other? What do we see as normal? Why?

Narratives play a critical role in answering these questions and in shaping all of our lives. Narratives are big picture ideas that help us make sense of what we see, hear, feel and experience. They are built up over time. They organise and reinforce common beliefs and ideas about how the world works and one's place in it.

Many now recognise that to change our world, we need to change the stories we tell ourselves about our world. There's growing recognition that the deep, interconnected challenges of climate change, injustice and inequality require us to embed new narratives and collective mindsets.

The work of understanding and changing narrative offers huge

> **"There's growing recognition that the deep, interconnected challenges of climate change, injustice and inequality require us to embed new narratives and collective mindsets."**

potential for those seeking progressive change. Doing so in ways that centre people and their welfare is essential. This report outlines some of the ways this potential can be realised based on experiences and insights in the UK and US.

K. Biswas and **Nina Spataru**, Co-Chairs of the Board of Trustees, Heard.

Executive Summary

In the Summer of 2021, The National Lottery Community Fund commissioned Heard, formally On Road Media, in partnership with independent researcher Shelley Dorrans, to explore the narrative change landscape in the UK. This research was commissioned as despite a proliferation of UK narrative research, strategic communications initiatives and various attempts to forge collaboration and learning in this space over the last 10 years, there hasn't yet been a significant increase in the ability of the not-for-profit sector to shape and change narratives.

The research comprises a **literature scan** and a **snapshot of views from twenty-six people** working in and around the narrative change space on the question of what is needed, in practice, to boost the capacity of the not-for-profit sector to change narratives in a more impactful way. It follows on from some great research already in the public sphere including work by Alice Sachradja and colleagues on the role of pop culture in social change and a recent report by Ruth Taylor on growing the practice of deep narrative change in the UK. We hope that our research complements this body of work by looking at the narrative change sector at large and its position within civil society more generally.

Narratives play a critical role in our lives. They shape the way that we understand the world and guide our decision-making and behaviour. They are deeply embedded in our culture and are present in the conversations that we have and what we see, read and hear in the media, popular culture, and politics.

There are many different definitions of narrative change in the literature, and an array of terminology that can make this work feel inaccessible to many. **Broadly speaking, we see narrative change as work designed to influence how large numbers of people think, feel and act over time.** It requires, firstly, an understanding of the common or dominant narratives that have historically marginalised or harmed a community and, secondly, the creation and spread of counter-narratives that disrupt or displace these. Narrative change should (i) empower and give agency to those impacted by harmful narratives and (ii) ultimately lead to social, cultural and/or political change.

We know that people and organisations have been seeking to tell different stories and influence how people perceive their communities for a long time. However, narrative change, as a distinct discipline, is embryonic in the UK, with a relatively small pool of funders, expert practitioners and civil society organisations involved. The US is seen by many as offering us much to learn, especially about the scale of investment and collaborative effort that's needed for narrative change, and the diversity of people leading this work. Whilst we can draw much inspiration from the US, we need to be mindful of taking ideas wholesale and implementing them in the UK given the differing cultural and political contexts, as well as the distinct funding contexts.

There is a strong sense of the potential – and necessity – for those working in pursuit of social change to be able to shift societal narratives in order to deliver lasting political and/or cultural change. We picked up a real sense of urgency in the literature and our fieldwork; the progressive sector's opponents (the populist and Far Right, and other extremist groups) are seen to have been quicker to grasp the importance of this work and to immerse people in narratives that serve their aims and maintain the status quo.

Our aim from the outset was to produce a concise and accessible report, with a series of practical recommendations. These are summarised on the following page.

At Heard we work as part of a wider ecosystem and we are keen to help improve its overall health and impact. We would like to thank everyone who gave up their time to be interviewed for this research – we are deeply grateful.

What would it take for narrative change work to have more real-world impact in the UK?

The research surfaced a wide range of practical recommendations for increasing the scale and impact of narrative change work in the UK, which we've summarised on this and the following page.

● **Investment allied to the scale and weight of the issues that the progressive sector is tackling.** Many interviewees recognised that investment in narrative change might require a 'leap of faith' by some funders, particularly in a time when there is so much frontline need, however they stressed that more investment is needed to truly shift the deeply entrenched narratives that harm people and communities. Interviewees pointed to the need for new funders in this space, alignment and pooling of funds to support larger-scale, longer-term initiatives (as well as share risks), and increased investment in ongoing collaboration between narrative change practitioners and with and among civil society organisations doing this work.

● **Flexible and innovative use of funding.** There is a strong message from the research about the need to fund different 'speeds' of narrative change work, which might comprise rapidly available funding that allows organisations to capitalise on sudden events or news stories, as well as funding for longer-term, deeper narrative change work. Interviewees also stressed the need for funders to commission or co-commission content (films, videos, books, documentaries etc) to get narratives into popular culture, rather than focussing almost exclusively on research and insight work, which might feel like the 'safer' option. Working with specialist creative agencies focused on creating content for social good will be part of this. The research points to the need for more investment in intersectional narrative change initiatives, which tackle deep cultural currents, alongside work on specific issues/policy agendas. The diffuse nature of narrative change work calls for a different and more flexible approach to evaluation that is not deeply rooted in timebound deliverables and outcomes.

● **A more diverse pool of storytellers, content creators and narrative strategists.** The research highlights the need to: (i) seek out and support campaigners, activists and grassroots movements with lived experience who are doing narrative change work but wouldn't necessarily refer to it as such (ii) connect them with wider networks and build their skills to be key messengers / spokespeople in a safe and strategic way (iii) fund media work and content creation by people with lived experience of issues. Looking to the future, funding could also usefully be channelled into supporting people from diverse backgrounds to get into journalism, writing and/or screen industries in order to create a pipeline of professionals who can bring new perspectives and experiences to these industries.

● **Wider access to narrative change resources and expertise for civil society.** The research indicates that a central repository of narrative change research, resources and tools that is freely available to civil society would be extremely helpful and reduce the risk of work being duplicated and narrative insights not being acted on. Linked to this point, distillations and digests of existing research and learning about particular agendas/issues would also be useful. Civil society organisations would benefit from low cost options for bringing in external help to support narrative change efforts. One suggestion is the creation of a bank of funder-approved "narrative change associates" who could be resourced to provide bespoke advice and support to networks or coalitions who are assessed to be in a good position to deliver narrative change work (similar to the Narrative Initiative's staff extenders).

● **Increased narrative capacity across civil society.** We know that there is a growing interest in narrative change work across civil society, but that people struggle to turn theory into practice or persuade colleagues to engage with it. Drawing inspiration from the States, and the range of mentoring and fellowship opportunities we came across, we feel that funders could usefully explore training and mentoring opportunities for those in the progressive sector in the UK. This would help widen to pool of people with deep knowledge of this work. One suggestion was the development of an accredited course for charity comms professionals which would give narrative change more gravitas and help create a pipeline of people knowledgeable about this work.

● **New partnerships and connections with disciplines and industries outside the (relatively narrow) narrative change space.** Successful narrative change requires a range of disciplines and skills. Interviewees would like to see funders exploring and investing in initiatives that combine expertise from a range of disciplines (the Butterfly Lab in the States provides inspiration for this). There is also more that could be done to strengthen connections between narrative practitioners, civil society and the entertainment and media industries.

Sachrajda and Zukowska (2021) advocate for a cultural narrative fellowship scheme to allow cultural strategists a chance to explore how narratives shape culture. Taylor (2021) suggests that a similar scheme for those working in more traditional cultural settings (galleries, museums) could be useful too. Several interviewees felt that there is untapped potential for civil society to work with corporations (with big budgets) to advance their narratives, although others were more cautious, viewing this as potentially too risky and challenging.

● **Investment in tech training and infrastructure.** We heard many times that civil society organisations often lack the skills to use social media platforms effectively to share their stories and narratives. They require training and support to do this. This could be through signposting to existing resources/guidance (research is needed to explore the quality of what already exists) or, if needed, the development of online modules. Tech could also be used to develop interactive maps that illustrate the range of work that is happening in this space across the UK to facilitate greater connection and learning (Sachradja and Zukowska (2021) recommended something similar). Many interviewees felt that having Big Listening technology available for the progressive sector could transform this work, however they recognise the high costs involved. It would also require investment in people with the expertise to analyse the data as well as infrastructure to share insights across the progressive sector.

● **Continued learning from other countries/regions.** Narrative work is funded at scale in the States and many interviewees have been inspired by work they have witnessed or read about there. Funders, where possible, should support practitioner learning exchanges and collaboration between the two nations. Beyond the transatlantic relationship, interviewees felt that there is value in bringing together international cohorts of practitioners and organisations to learn and collaborate (as ASO Communications and NEON are doing through their Global Messaging Programme), as certain narratives operate at a global scale and require a global response.

Contents

Introduction

Our research questions:

What would it take for narrative change work to have more real-world impact in the UK?

● Where is this work having an impact and what can we learn and build on from those examples?

● What have been and are the key barriers to impact?

● What inspiration can we glean from narrative infrastructure in the US?

● How can technology be better integrated and deployed to improve the efficacy and speed of work in this space?

● What do practitioners in this space need for their work to have more impact?

● What do civil society organisations need from practitioners?

● How do we ensure an effective dynamic between narrative organsations and not for profit organsations working together?

Our methods:

Advisory Group: We recruited five experts from the UK and US to guide us over the course of the work (listed in Appendix 1).

Desk research: We undertook a rapid literature scan to familiarise ourselves with the field of narrative change; gain an understanding of the main organisations operating in this space in the UK in order to inform our fieldwork; and begin to answer our research questions (see Appendix 2 for list of sources).

Fieldwork

● A workshop with 8 UK funders at the beginning of the research to inform them about the work and explore their interest in the narrative change space.

● Qualitative interviews with 26 individuals (listed in Appendix 1). Interviewees comprised narrative change and communications experts, representatives of civil society organisations, and others with an interest in narrative change work.

● A workshop with our Advisors to inform them of the main findings and discuss possible recommendations.

Some caveats

Our literature review comprised a relatively brief scan of some of the key sources of literature that we found online, already knew about, or were suggested to us by our Advisors or interviewees. It is certainly not a comprehensive survey of what is a large field of literature that draws on multiple disciplines. As our literature sources were not selected in any systematic way, we recognise that there are likely to be important gaps/omissions in what we read.

Our interviewees comprised people and organisations we already knew about or were suggested to us by our Advisors or interviewees. There were many more names put forward than our budget and timeframe would allow us to include and so we had to make some pragmatic decisions about the best mix of people to approach in order to capture a range of views and experiences. Again, we recognise that there are likely to be important gaps in our sample of interviewees, and the range of views and ideas that we captured in the research.

Impressions from the literature

Narratives play a critical role in our lives. They shape the way that people understand the world and guide their decision-making and behaviour, individually and collectively. Narratives are deeply embedded in our culture, and are present in what we see, read and hear in the media, pop culture, politics and our own personal experience. Saltmarshe (2018) notes that: *"cultural narratives are foundational; they affect our norms, who we think of as insiders and outsiders, who is deserving and undeserving, and why our world looks the way it does."*

The literature highlights a growing interest in, and excitement about, narrative change in recent years (in the UK, US and elsewhere). There are new funders entering the space, novel collaborations emerging, and a range on initiatives spanning diverse issues such as poverty, health, criminal justice, climate, ageing and children in care, as well as an emerging body of pan-issue work.

The drivers of this interest in this area include:

● *"a developing body of research that suggests the way in which people navigate the world and make decisions is not purely rational but influenced by emotion and a range of cognitive biases too"* (Davidson, 2016)

● increasing awareness that the *"traditional model of charity communications does not deliver enough…"* (Sachrajda and Baumgartner, 2019);

● recognition of the systemic nature of many of the social problems that the sector is trying to tackle and that *"stories make, prop up, and bring down systems"* (Saltmarshe, 2018)

● growing interest in the role of public opinion in social change more widely and the role that narratives play in shaping this (Sachrajda and Baumgartner, 2019)

● a greater understanding of, and interest in, the role of popular culture in shaping social change.

Authors agree that the progressive sector's traditional focus on policy change may not be sufficient in itself to deliver sustainable change. As Davidson (2016) explains: *"While we might win occasional policy battles, these wins are constantly under attack and in danger of being reversed… One of the reasons is that we are often working against powerful narratives embedded in the overarching culture. Thus we also need to look beyond the policy sphere, as narratives are embedded in the larger culture and in institutions."*

There is a sense of urgency in much of the reviewed literature, which was mirrored in our fieldwork. This is a critical time for civil society to get to grips with narratives and narrative change. The progressive sector's opponents (the populist and Far Right, and other extremist groups) are seen to have been quicker to grasp the importance of narratives and to create *"narrative networks that entangle millions and millions of people in extremely deep and immersive experiences that reinforce specific values, ideas, desires and norms."* (Robinson, 2018). As one author argues, what's required now is a *"narrative moonshot"* that creates new and different ways of talking about the future to take on these opponents and help transcend societal divisions (Giuliano da Empoli, 2021).

There is fairly widespread agreement in the literature about examples of 'successful' narrative change initiatives (although perhaps not a very wide range as yet), as well as some of the main challenges and barriers to impact (discussed later in the report). Similarly, there

appears to be agreement that growing the impact of this field in the UK will require additional investment that supports a new level of collaboration within and beyond the progressive sector.

"Narratives are a collection of related stories that helps people make sense of what they see, hear, feel and experience. They are built up over time and organise and reinforce common beliefs or ideas about how the world works and one's place in it. They have no standard form or structure, no beginning or end."

The Narrative Institute (2017)

The narrative change universe is vast. It draws on a wide range of academic disciplines including cognitive neuroscience, linguistics, behavioural psychology, political science, sociology, communications science, philosophy, and cultural studies. It involves many different types of actors, from academics and researchers, to movement builders and organisers, strategic communications experts, lawyers, advertisers, specialists in big data, creatives and cultural organisers, and narrative strategists. It includes activity focused on

particular policy agendas as well as work aimed at tackling deeper narratives that shape our wider culture and underpin numerous social, political and environmental issues.

While the richness and diversity of the narrative change field is clearly a strength, we also feel that it makes entering and navigating it complex, especially for those who are new to it and for smaller charities and grassroots groups with fewer resources and less time to delve into it. In addition, although some of the sources reviewed are exceptionally well-written and accessible, others are very academic and rely on knowledge of complex concepts.

The sources illustrate, and comment on, a lack of agreement on key terminology within and across disciplines (see the text box below). As Davidson (2016) points out: *"There is always a danger when a term becomes a trend, because it starts to become a short-cut for thinking – a term without precision - where everybody thinks they know what it means, but nobody really does for sure"*. The Narrative Institute's 2017 listening exercise also revealed a: *"recurring desire for sharper definitions of terms"*, a sentiment echoed strongly in our fieldwork.

The complexity of ideas and work in this space leads some practitioners to talk about this work as 'changing hearts and minds' rather than 'narrative change.'

Getting to grips with terminology

These are some of the concepts/terms we came across in our brief scan of the literature. It is probably not clear to everyone working in civil society, or in narrative change work itself, what these mean and how they relate to each other.

● Narrative archetype	● Narrative power	● Civic space
● Culture/al production	● Narrative salience	● Cultural products
● Culture change	● Narrative coherence	● Cultural models
● Narrative weather	● Narrative transportation	● Frames
● Deep narrative change	● Narrative strategy	● Mental models
● Cultural trend analysis	● Narrative immersion	● Mindsets
● In-field ethnography	● Narrative organising	● Worldviews
● Narrative organising	● Narrative dispersion	● Narratives
● Social listening	● Narrative motion	● Meta narratives
● Data-scraping	● Narrative network	● Deep narratives
● Big listening	● Narrative patterns	● Narrative waters
● Memetics	● Narrative ecosystem	● Narrative system
		● Narrative environment

Defining key terms

The starting point of our research was to clarify what we, as a research team, understood by key terms such as story, narrative and narrative change and how they relate to each other. We found the work of the Narrative Initiative in the US extremely helpful in this respect and have drawn heavily on the definitions set out in its 2017 publication *Toward a New Gravity*.

Term	Definition	Examples relating to poverty
Stories	Stories are discrete descriptions of real or imaginary events in which something happens to someone or something. They have a beginning, middle and end.	Carl chooses to claim benefits instead of going to work every day.
Narrative	A narrative is a collection of related stories that helps people make sense of what they see, hear, feel and experience. They are built up over time and organise and reinforce common beliefs or ideas about how the world works and one's place in it. They have no standard form or structure, no beginning or end.	Hard working, taxpaying families around the country are paying the price for those who refuse to work and instead milk the all too generous benefits system.
Deep narrative	Deep narratives are characterized by pervasiveness and stubborn intractability. They are deeply embedded in a culture or society and consistently repeated and reproduced over time. They provide a foundational framework for understanding both history and current events, and inform our basic concepts of identity, community and belonging.	Success in life is solely a product of hard work and good choices.

Narratives are intrinsically linked to power. As the Narrative Initiative (2019) explains: *"Who holds power and how they use it is both embedded in and supported by dominant narratives. Successful narrative change shifts power as well as dominant narratives."*

Metaphors in narrative change

The use of metaphors is very common in narrative change work: they are highly visual and can help shape how people understand a concept or issue. The Narrative Initiative's mosaic metaphor, referred to many times in the literature we read, helpfully illustrates the relationship between stories and narratives.

"What tiles are to mosaics, stories are to narratives. The relationship is symbiotic; stories bring narratives to life by making them relatable and accessible, while narratives infuse stories with deeper meaning."

The Narrative Institute (2017)

What is narrative change and what does it involve?

Broadly speaking, we see narrative change as work designed to influence how large numbers of people think, feel and act over time. It requires, firstly, an understanding of the common or dominant narratives that have historically marginalised or harmed a community and, secondly, the creation and spread of counter-narratives that disrupt or displace these. Narrative change should (i) empower and give agency to those impacted by harmful narratives and (ii) ultimately lead to social, cultural and/or political change.

We feel there are three main components in narrative change work:

Insight and analysis: to fully understand common or dominant narratives and the political, economic, social, and other incentives that maintain, reinforce, or challenge these narratives and to create counter-narratives and test their propensity to reshape how people think, feel, and ultimately act.

Strategy and implementation: co-ordinated activity to spread the counter-narratives at scale and over time by people and organisations who are authentic, motivated and persistent in order to get these narratives into everyday public discourse. This should follow an approach with a clearly defined aim, short-term and long-term objectives, tactics, and success indicators.

Measurement: ongoing monitoring and evaluation to understand what is working well / less well and why, and evidence impact. (This is felt to be a largely underdeveloped area in the UK as yet).

We are using a broad definition of 'narrative change' that encompasses different types of work including shorter term attempts to shift public thinking to support a set of policies or actions, along with deeper, longer term narrative change approaches.

Narrative change landscape in the UK: Main actors and infrastructure

The narrative change landscape is vast. The diagram below illustrates just some of the actors and supporting infrastructure involved in narrative change work in the UK.

Culture and policy influencers and shapers								
Media editors & journalists	Commissioners and content creators in the creative and entertainment industries	Political campaigners, politicians and governments	Faith and community-based leaders and groups	Respected celebrities, sports stars and other public figures	Large corporations & the advertising industry	Artists and writers	Social media influencers	Online gaming developers

People and organisations doing narrative change work			
People/communities with lived experience of an issue Other campaigners, activists and influencers Grassroots movements	Civil society organisations working on specific issues	Partnerships of civil society organisations working together on a specific issue or issues	Cross-sector partnerships of civil society organisations and others working at an intersectional level (limited at present)

Supporting infrastructure					
Charitable funders and foundations	Individual narrative change practitioners / strategists	Specialist narrative change organisations	Civil society organisations which deliver narrative change as part of a broader mission and/or support others to do this work	Organisations seeking to shift narratives in mainstream art and entertainment	Organisations/ businesses undertaking public opinion research
Creative agencies focussed on creating content for social good	Existing networks / coalitions of people & organisations working together on an issue/s	Organisations with skills/ technology to monitor narratives in public spheres	Narrative change communities of practice	Strategic communications and framing experts	Academic researchers from the fields of psychology, linguistics and others

Narrative change infrastructure in the UK

Sachrajda and Baumgartner (2019) report that, over the last ten years, there have been significant improvements in the progressive sector's practice in relation to leading with values, fronting communications with credible messengers, framing the system, and creating a positive, future-facing vision. However, as our literature scan and fieldwork suggests, narrative change work is still embryonic in the UK, with some interesting (but largely unconnected) pockets of work and a small pool of expert practitioners and civil society organisations involved. Looking more closely at the some of the infrastructure outlined on the previous slide, our research found the following:

Funders: a pool of funders including Unbound Philanthropy, Comic Relief, Oak Foundation, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The Wellcome Trust, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and the Environmental Funders Network engaged in this work, with a growing number of 'narrative curious' funders interested in learning more.

Narrative change researchers / practitioners: there are a small number of expert organisations including FrameWorks UK, Future Narratives Lab, Culture Hacks Lab and the Public Interest Research Centre, as well as individual practitioners in the UK, many of whom expressed high demand for their services.

Civil society organisations doing narrative change work as part of a broader remit and/ or skilling up others to do this work; this includes FrameWorks UK, NEON, Equally Ours, More in Common, Common Cause Foundation, Counterpoint Arts, and the Public Interest Research Centre (PIRC) amongst others.

Civil society organisations seeking to shift narratives in mainstream media, entertainment and/or art: this can involve brokering relationships between people with lived experience, the media, entertainment, research and/or creative industries, or working directly with the creative and entertainment industries to inspire and support change. Organisations include Opening Knowledge across Research and Entertainment (OKRE), Purpose Disruptors, Albert and Heard.

Specialist creative agencies focused on creating content for social good: this includes organisations like Glimpse, Nice & Serious, Rubber Republic, Futerra and Uncommon.

Networks of people and organisations engaged in narrative change work. This includes Alice Sachradja's community convening with Unbound Philanthropy, the Reset Narratives community, set up by Ella Saltmarshe and Paddy Loughmam, the Narrative Avengers community, established by Phoebe Tickell, and the Narrative Working Group (NARWHAL) convenings, curated by Phoebe Tickell.

Narrative change guidance, resources and tools: there are some really accessible, brilliantly-written resources produced by organisations in this space including practical toolkits, reading lists, messaging guides and podcasts on a range of issues.

Organisations with tech capabilities to monitor narratives in the public sphere: a couple of interviewees have used corpus linguists in academic institutions to support their narrative change work, however this does not appear to be common practice.

Narrative change infrastructure in the UK: some things to consider

In discussing current narrative change infrastructure, interviewees identified a number of issues which could usefully be considered and addressed in future:

● The narrative change space in the UK is viewed by some as the preserve of mainly white, middle class, educated professionals; many interviewees stressed the need for a more diverse group of people to lead and deliver narrative change work.

● Narrative change resources (messaging guides, training tools etc) are currently spread across multiple organisations' websites, making it hard for people to know where to find trusted advice. This situation also raises the potential for resources to be duplicated.

● Interviewees expressed a lot of respect for the work of others in this space. At the same time, we picked up a sense of competitiveness from organisations vying for limited funding from trusts and foundations. This situation probably isn't helped by some of the ambiguous terminology (see page 9), nor by the fairly wide range of work that is described as 'narrative change'.

● The issue of impartiality amongst some civil society organisations advising others in this space was raised as a potential challenge. As one interviewee noted: *"[Some organisations in this space]...have a firm worldview and that infuses the advice that they give you. The issue of neutrality is going to be very important to a lot of charities."*

● Interviewees pointed to a need for clarity about the kinds of narrative change work that funders want to support (as one interviewee put it: *"I'd like to understand the kinds of work that funders want to support and why, and the kinds of that work fall outside of this"*). However, interviewees also recognised that this might not be straightforward for funders to define, particularly if they are new to this area of work.

● Interviewees reflected that whilst narrative change work is generally long-term, there is also the need to respond to unforeseen events and opportunities that crop up along the way and to learn from and strategically build on them – rather than chalking them up to isolated happy accidents resulting from the passion and charisma of well-situated individuals. As one interviewee explained: *"There are almost two tracks to this work: long-term, deep systemic work, for example, how we change the way people think about race, and then the need for very rapid response things that you can't foresee, for example, Gareth Southgate's Dear England letter and the three Hijabis' petition."* There's a sense that funders tend to focus on medium term work, with little funding available for either rapid response or longer-term, deep systemic work.

● There was a strong message from our fieldwork (as well as the literature) about the need for continued sharing, collaboration and alignment between narrative change practitioners and with and among civil society partners, especially in tackling "deep" narratives, which are clearly beyond the capability of single organisations to shift.

Where has narrative change work had an impact?

Some international examples

We identified a number of impactful narrative change initiatives in the literature and through our conversations, some of which are described below and on the following pages.

● **Marriage equality campaign in the USA** (the most commonly cited example in the literature and by interviewees). Efforts to legalise same-sex marriage that started emerging in the 1990s eventually lead to full marriage equality in 2015. This example illustrates the importance of centring shared values (love, kindness, compassion, and family) to induce connection, rather than relying on shock tactics, facts and data alone, or appealing to rights-based arguments which can be perceived as overly abstract/academic or suggestive of a win/lose scenario. Robinson (2018) however points out that it would be wrong to think the US equal marriage campaign was about empathy alone, arguing that it required a *"focus on changing power dynamics, not just emotional dynamics, and pursuing both in an integrated way"*. Sources also suggest this campaign was a powerful example of a collaboratively designed strategy that involved a multi-sector *"narrative network"* spanning movements, advertising, the arts, entertainment and big media (Evans, 2020).

● **Jacinda Adern's handling of the 2019 Christchurch mosque massacre**, where she urged compassion, peace and unity. In her speech following the massacre, she was seen to have demonstrated the importance of expanding the notion of 'us', while isolating the attacker as 'other' and as an outlier (Jennings & Quinton, 2019). This stood in stark contrast to the anti-immigrant sentiment in many Western nations and led to a law banning most semi-automatic weapons in New Zealand and the 'Christchurch Call', an international bid to stamp out violent extremism online.

● The global **Black Lives Matter** social movement has shone a spotlight on the racism, discrimination and inequality experienced by Black people. It began in the US in July 2013 with the hashtag Black Lives Matter on social media and gained global attention following the 2020 protests about the death of George Floyd. The movement successfully linked police violence to other areas of historic racial injustice in, for example, housing and education, highlighting the systemic nature of oppression. In the US the protests were attended by an estimated 15-26M people, making it one of the largest movements in the country's history. The true impact of the movement is impossible to quantify, however it has undoubtedly had an effect on modern society's awareness of systemic racism.

● In May 2018, a two-thirds majority of Irish voters cast ballots to **repeal the Eighth Amendment**, a constitutional ban on abortion. The Campaign to Repeal the Eighth Amendment had its roots in an unsuccessful Anti-Amendment Campaign in 1983 followed by several other abortion referendums in 1992. The campaign was reignited 20 years later following the death of Savita Halappanavar in 2012. A 2018 article by Loughlin and Ó Cionnaith describes how a five-year plan to put personal stories and medical facts at the heart of the campaign (rather than legal and religious arguments) resulted in victory. The writers highlight the meticulous planning

that characterised the campaign, the simple branding ('Together for Yes'), the clear-cut communication strategy, the success in getting buy-in from large numbers of the general public, who volunteered their time to help, and the effective use of technology and social media platforms to mobilise people. Ultimately, they argue, it was the voices and stories of affected women which led to victory: *"The resounding result was not swayed by slick advertising, poster campaigns, political messaging or even televised debates. It was won through conversations and experiences. It was the raw emotion of normal women, the mothers, daughters, girlfriends, colleagues, sisters and wives of Ireland who came forward to tell their stories."*

Some UK examples

Joseph Rowntree Foundation's (JRF) work on UK poverty, in partnership with FrameWorks and others. As an evidence-driven organisation, JRF has history of producing authoritative research reports on poverty in the UK. Against a backdrop of poverty denial, blame and stigma, and inspired by the pop culture for social change movement, JRF decided to try something new. From 2016 they worked with FrameWorks to understand and shift public attitudes around poverty, which would ultimately build pressure for policy change.

JRF worked with the poverty sector at large, sharing insights, developing tools and delivering training to get new narratives out. Via a partnership with Heard, they centred voices of experience within the project. In 2018, JRF commissioned filmmaker Sean McAllister to produce *A Northern Soul*, which illustrates the reality of life for many working people locked in poverty in Britain. Screened in cinemas and on the BBC this was part of a wider cultural shift in depictions of hardship.

A large number of our interviewees have been inspired and influenced by JRF's work, particularly the way in which JRF collaborated with and supported the wider poverty sector, and many feel that it played an important

part in shifting discourse and attitudes. While we aren't aware of JRF producing a publicly-available evaluation of this work, anecdotally we heard that the work led to a change in the way that some media represented people in poverty and influenced the way in which some politicians talked about poverty, using language and framing that JRF was promoting. In 2020, a Guardian newspaper article reported a 'dramatic softening in attitudes in recent years' towards social security (as found by the Social Attitudes Survey), indicating that *"seemingly entrenched popular views on benefits – that they create welfare dependency and encourage "shirking and skiving" – are melting away."* Whilst this finding can not be directly attributed to JRF's work, it is nonetheless encouraging for poverty campaigners.

Marcus Rashford's free school meals social media campaign began with a tweet on 19th March 2020, after it was announced that schools would be closed due to the Covid pandemic. Marcus used his public profile and Twitter account to help raise over £20M for Fareshare. He then galvanised sufficient support from the public, organisations and businesses to force two Government u turns that resulted in free school meals for children who needed them over Summer 2020 and into the 2021 school holidays.

The success of Marcus's work highlights the importance of a credible, authentic and humble messenger (he experienced hunger as a child and sees his role as providing a platform for children and families in poverty); creative use of language (*"This summer should have been filled with pride ...parents and children waving their flags, but in reality, Wembley stadium could be filled more than twice with children who have had to skip meals during lockdown due to their families not being able to access food."*) and seeking common ground which enabled him to mobilise support without provoking backlash. (*'Whatever your feeling, opinion, or judgement, food poverty is never the child's fault. Let's wrap arms around each other and stand together to say that this is unacceptable, that we are united in protecting our children'.*)

UK examples: influencing pop culture for social change

The work of Women's Aid and Radio 4's flagship soap "The Archers" in 2016 on a storyline about coercive control, as part of a broader, coordinated campaign. With an audience of 4.7 million listeners at the time, it sparked a national conversation about this little understood form of abuse. This led to a 17% increase in calls to the hotline run by Women's Aid and Refuge and greater public understanding of the crime. Polly Neate, Chief Executive of Women's Aid in 2016 said, *"The incredible awareness-raising that The Archers has done is the most important thing of all... A huge number of people are now identifying with a survivor of coercive control."*

Heard's All About Trans programme has worked with EastEnders, Hollyoaks, Holby City and Emmerdale, bringing the real lived experiences of transgender people in the UK to life on screen. Emmerdale's first transgender character "Matty Barton" is played by a trans man and All About Trans member Ash Palmisciano. Members of Heard's All About Trans network worked with storyliners to build their understanding of trans experiences, steering Matty's story away from a focus on surgery and towards a more realistic and authentic portrayal of the relationship with his girlfriend. Although the discussion around trans issues in the news media is often fraught and polarising, great strides have been made in popular culture depiction of ordinary trans people in Britain today.

Other examples commonly mentioned by interviewees

Interviewees also pointed to other successful narrative change work including: efforts to ensure parity of esteem between mental and physical health in the UK which was finally enshrined in law by the Health and Social Care Act 2012; the international Me Too movement which has led to cultural shifts, legal reform and new journalistic responses to sexual violence; a range of recent climate campaigns in particular *Fridays for Future,* which have sparked a rapid uptick in public and political discourse on climate change over the last few years, and Ireland becoming the first country to vote for marriage equality via a referendum in 2017.

What can we learn from these examples

It isn't possible to distil a set of generic critical success factors from all of these examples due to differences in context, drivers and scale etc. However, our fieldwork suggested that there could be some 'enabling factors' or conditions that support narrative change work. Interviewees also provided some advice on how to approach narrative change work, summarised below.

Enabling factors

● The issue is salient in public discourse. If not, then efforts are required to lay the public policy groundwork. (In Ireland for example, key LGBT organisations worked for more than 10 years to line up support among the public, local politicians, and political parties for advancements in LGBT rights before they pursued the significant societal change of equal marriage (Parker, 2017))

● The work offers a positive, hopeful vision of the future that feels within reach, and is underpinned by a clear aim and a coherent strategy

● There is deep involvement of the people/communities affected by the negative dominant narratives from the outset, not just as research subjects or spokespeople but as strategists and decision makers too

● There is long-term funding and commitment over years, sometimes decades

● There is a group of leaders and a sector that is ready and able to work together to change narratives, putting aside any differences they may have.

How to approach narrative change work

● Put well-told human stories at the centre of the work

● View people as allies or fellow travellers and bring them over to your side, rather than setting out to 'defeat' them

● Work with early adopters to demonstrate change/success and bring others on board

● Name and normalise the conflict that people feel about an issue/s and work through this

● Accept that there will be setbacks and trade offs along the way

● Celebrate, but don't settle for, incremental wins – and recognise that long term narrative change is made up of the moments and content that galvanise and move people on a given issue at a given time

● Persist: *"There are big stories in our society that are being reinforced and entrenched all the time. They are so easily activated because they are deep within us...That's why you have to keep on keeping on. Narrative change is about igniting the better, more helpful ways of thinking and you just need to keep going."* (Interviewee)

"You need the leaders who have a strategy, an intent, who can access the funding, build relationships, access networks, who are in a position to do narrative change work."

(Interviewee)

What inspiration can we draw from US narrative change infrastructure?

We can only offer a very partial answer to this question as our budget and time constraints did not allow for a comprehensive exploration of the narrative change sector in the US. It was clear from our reading and interviews that many see the US as offering us much to learn, especially about the scale of investment and collaborative effort that's needed for narrative change. The main infrastructure organisations that we came across, or were mentioned to us, are described in brief on the following couple of pages, along with some examples of interesting or inspiring activity that interviewees highlighted. We know that there are many gaps in what we have been able to cover in our report.

Some general observations

● As Taylor (2021) pointed out, there are lessons to be learned from the US about the leadership of narrative change work, which is much better embedded in movements for liberation than in the UK. She notes that *"Color of Change, the Pop Culture Collaborative, Narrative Initiative and ReFrame, four of the major narrative actors in the US, are all led by people of colour and their work cannot be separated from the energy, activism and wisdom found in the Black Lives Matter movement, the anti-gun movement and other movements for change"*.

● The pop culture for social change movement is much more established than in the UK, thanks in large part to the creation of the Pop Culture Collaborative (many interviewees stressed that they would welcome much greater investment in this kind of work in the UK)

● There are a wide range of training programmes aimed at skilling up individual activists and campaigners as well as not-for-profit organisations

● There is much to learn about how to deploy creative methodologies to support narrative change from the work of the Center for Story-Based Strategy (see following pages), Beautiful Trouble and the Centre for Artistic Activism for example

● When it comes to tech infrastructure, ReFrame and the Narrative Observatory in the US (both described in the following pages) illustrate how tech can be used to advance narrative change work.

Whilst almost everyone that we spoke to said that they draw much inspiration from work in the States, several sounded a note of caution about taking ideas wholesale from the US and implementing them in the UK. The funding available for narrative change work in the US far outstrips that of the UK, and whilst our cultures have much in common, there are critical differences relating to cultural practices and the polarisation of politics and society. One interview reflected on the differing funding contexts saying *"We need to be a bit careful about what we can actually learn from the States because its on a different level, the money is there. It can create problems, drawing all these ideas from the States and then trying to implement them as a kind of cottage industry in the UK."*

The Narrative Initiative, founded in 2016 by the Ford Foundation and Atlantic Philanthropies, was cited often in the literature and by interviewees as a source of inspiration. Its mission is to build network infrastructure, improve narrative change practice, and catalyse alignment in the field. The Narrative Initiative supports the narrative change field in a wide range of practical ways. Just a few of the interesting and inspiring things we came across include: a Narrative Reading List for 2022, a compilation of essays, articles and podcasts from 2021, as well as a general Resource Library; a ghost writing service, Word Force, for organisers and community leaders working on immigrant rights and/or racial justice issues; the Changemaker Authors Cohort, a year-long intensive coaching programme for activists and social justice practitioners to write books aimed at changing deep narratives; and a 'staff extenders' programme where narrative practitioners are seconded to non-profit organisations to provide additional capacity and expertise. A 2019 report sets out the Institute's learning and insights from its efforts to support narrative change infrastructure at a state-wide level in Minnesota (see page 22).

ReFrame is a movement building institution that invests in people – strategists, creatives, leaders, and dreamers – to develop the skills, acumen, and networks needed to advance just narratives at scale. Alongside its training and mentoring programmes, which many interviewees highlighted, ReFrame uses powerful technology, originally developed for corporate brand tracking (and therefore cost prohibitive to most progressive movements), to understand narratives across society in real time, gain strategic insight, and forecast opportunities or 'tipping points' for the progressive sector to advance racial, economic, gender, and climate justice. A recent report sets out a series of Narrative Predictions for 2022.

The Pop Culture Collaborative was founded in 2016 by a network of philanthropic leaders led by Unbound Philanthropy, Nathan Cummings Foundation and Ford Foundation. It is a philanthropic resource and funder learning community working to transform the narrative landscape in America around people of colour, immigrants, refugees, Muslims, and indigenous peoples, especially those who are women, queer, transgender and/or disabled. Its long-term goal is to support the growth of a pop culture for social change field capable of building the desire among a majority of Americans to create a just and pluralist nation. The Collaborative was mentioned by many as a particularly exciting example of a narrative change initiative that operates at scale and models many good practice principles for funder collaboration. Interviewees pointed to the inspiring work of its Senior Fellows as well as its Becoming America Fund which supports artists, entertainers and activists to build public imagination around our collective future by creating change-inspiring pop culture content.

The Narrative Observatory, established by Harmony Labs with funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, is a relatively new, purpose-built data platform designed to identify, measure and track narratives related to social issues over long timescales and across multiple culture domains, learn about the people or audiences who participate in these narratives, and provide narrative and cultural strategists with audience-specific story opportunities and threats. It differs from many social listening tools (which count tweets, hastags, articles produced etc) by examining the actual media experiences and behaviours of a nationally representative sample of over 300,000 people in the US. It initially focussed on poverty and economic mobility in the States but is currently expanding its work.

The Centre for Cultural Power is a women of colour, artist-led organisation, inspiring artists and culture makers to imagine a world where power is distributed equitably and where we live in harmony with nature. It supports artists through fellowships, training and opportunities for activation. It creates intersectional stories and content addressing issues of migration, climate, gender and racial justice. It is building a field where the arts and social justice sectors meet, supporting a thriving ecosystem of cultural strategy. In 2020, it launched the [Disruptors Fellowship](#) aimed at supporting emerging television writers of colour who identify as transgender, non-binary, disabled, or undocumented/formerly undocumented. The 3-month fellowship for LA-based emerging talent includes mentorship, professional development, master classes and a $6,000 stipend.

The Centre for Story Based Strategy, founded in 2002, offers a wide range of tools, training, and strategy support to organisations and movements working for justice and transformative social change. It describes *story-based* strategy as a participatory approach that links movement building with an analysis of narrative power and places storytelling at the center of social change. A wide range of creative (and freely available) narrative change resources can be found [here](#).

The Opportunity Agenda, launched in 2006, is a social justice communication lab that works to advance the impact of the social justice community. It does this by shaping compelling narratives and messages; building the communication capacity of leaders through training and resources; and engaging with artists, creatives, and culture makers as powerful storytellers to shift the public discourse. It has recently announced its inaugural [Culture & Narrative Fellowship Programme](#) which will support five artists to tackle dominant narratives for economic justice, which intersect with issues including immigration, mass incarceration, public health, climate change, food justice, and drug decriminalisation. Each Fellow receives $15,000 in support, customized advisement sessions from The Opportunity Agenda, and access to the organization's expansive network of creatives and advocates.

Race Forward, founded in 1981, advances racial justice through research, media, and practice. Its mission is to catalyse movement building for racial justice in partnership with communities, organisations, and sectors and build strategies to advance racial justice in policies, institutions, and culture. In 1998, Race Forward began publishing the award-winning [Colorlines](#) with the goal of popularising racial justice narratives and centring the people of colour who fight for it. At the time, these stories were not being told by other media, particularly mainstream media. In 2020, Race Forward announced its $1.8M [Butterfly Lab for Immigrant Narrative Strategy](#), funded by Unbound Philanthropy, Luminate, Oak Foundation, and Open Society Foundation. The Lab brings together a select cohort of 16 leaders drawn from work in advocacy, the law, organizing, policy, human rights, the arts, and popular culture to develop effective narratives that honour the humanity of migrants, refugees and immigrants.

Learning from The Narrative Initiative's Project: *Building Narrative Infrastructure in Minnesota*

Overview

In 2017, the Narrative Initiative launched a state strategy to support the emergence of narrative change infrastructure at the state level. Over the course of 2017-2019, it worked in partnership with Take Action Minnesota and the Our Minnesota Future coalition as well as a number of other national partners to experiment with a variety of approaches to build what it called a "narrative nervous system." A 2019 report describes the programme as well as lessons and recommendations for narrative change practitioners and funders, some of which are summarised on this slide. The Narrative Initiative's full report can be found here.

The long-term aim of Narrative Initiative's programme was to support state partners in: (i) catalysing narrative shift around race, gender, and the role of government (ii) fostering greater alignment between organisations and movements, and (iii) articulating a more inclusive "we" to unite diverse communities. This required a focus on skills (building the capacity and competency to use a range of tools and methods to advance narratives) and strategy (deploying those skills with a set of strategic partners; preserving alignment on deep narratives inside an overall strategic framework, and integrating them into daily practice and rapid response work). It also required a robust infrastructure of aligned actors with a shared vision and values, articulated in ways that are authentic to the communities in which they work.

The Narrative Initiative allocated roughly $750,000 in direct support of the programme over the course of three years including allocating 1.5 FTE staff to manage it. The work involved: supporting alignment and collaboration amongst organisations involved; commissioning research into dominant narratives; a range of training for local actors, including social media training; a library of tools and resources; supporting partners to integrate three deep narratives – known as the Minnesota Values – into all aspects of their work. The impact of the programme is outlined in the report.

Some learning from the programme

- Narrative change is a long-term power-building strategy. Locating narrative inside a multidisciplinary power-building framework enables narrative change to be connected not just to communications, but also to organising, policy and cultural work.

- Narrative change work benefits from an organising approach that emphasizes building relationships, aligning organisations and constituencies, and taking collective action.

- Coalitions are powerful narrative change-makers and finding balance across the coalition is crucial. Dedicating additional support for groups with fewer resources helps ensure their values and ideas are given equal weight in the shared narratives being developed.

- The commitment to narrative change work must be significant, sustained, and strategic; funders should make significant multi-year commitments that extend beyond single electoral cycles.

- Resources are needed to support narrative strategy, not just build narrative skills. Whilst funding for additional comms staff is undoubtedly helpful, resources are also need to enable organisations to align strategically, to implement research findings and to use communications products and tools.
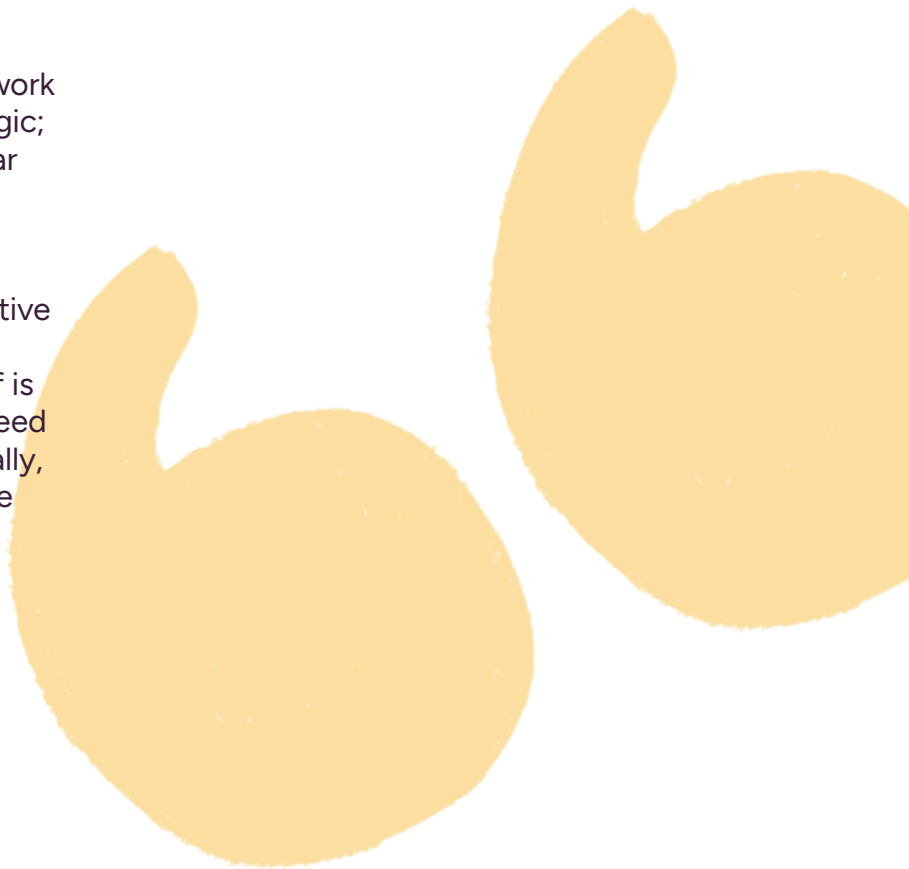
How can tech be better deployed to improve the efficacy and impact of work in this space?

Many interviewees feel there is untapped potential to harness technology to advance narrative change work in the UK.

Tech advances over the last 10-20 years offer the opportunity to quickly and cheaply create content and to communicate with much wider audiences than previously. One interviewee reflected: *"We live in an age of acceleration... You could have far more reach and impact curating content on a Twitter feed than you would writing a piece behind The Times paywall. You get a more instant hit."* (Interviewee).

The literature also points to the need for the progressive sector to embrace technology in their narrative change work. As Kim, Hynes & Shirazi (2017) point out, the political situation in the US and around the world more recently has led to a renewed focus on the evolving use of big data and social media, which makes it even easier for *"symbols to succeed over substance in the public square"* and has exposed the vulnerability of democratic institutions from right-wing populism. They suggest that while there has been a proliferation of useful software, platforms and services, these are not necessarily accessible to social justice leaders, noting that new tools often require significant technical knowledge to get most out of them. Interviewees agreed, and additionally pointed to the high cost of some of these tools which puts them beyond the reach of most organisations in the progressive space.

Interviewees expressed some concerns about using tech that needs to be navigated by the progressive sector including (i) social media and other tech platforms being owned by corporates with a profit model that is at odds with progressive values, and (ii) the backdrop of fake news, media manipulation and disinformation that is undermining people's trust in social and mainstream media.

"Digital has created new spaces to engage with people but charities are running to keep up. How do you frame messages in a visual space for example? What are the memes that are going to play to you as opposed to against you?"

(Interviewee)

So what is needed in practice?

A full answer to this question requires more in-depth exploration than we were able to carry out, however four things stood out from our discussions with interviewees:

● Increased capacity within civil society to use social media effectively to create new content, spread messages/narratives, and monitor their reach and impact. This includes platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and YouTube Ads.

● An accessible online library of existing narrative change resources and reports, searchable by theme (the Reset Narratives Community has created this for its newsletter archive but it needs to be done on a larger scale).

● 'Big Listening' technology (involving the quantitative tracking of words and phrases used in public communications) for the sector to generate snapshots of how people are thinking, feeling and talking about an issue in order to inform ongoing narrative approaches and tactics. Taylor (2021) puts forward the idea of a shared "digital dashboard" for the progressive sector to avoid organisations and movements duplicating data harvesting processes and to increase overall impact.

● Online interactive maps of the narrative change 'ecosystem' to facilitate better connections between organisations working on similar topics. One example we heard about is the Social Impact Entertainment Map, developed by the Skoll Centre for Social Impact Entertainment, which charts the field of social impact entertainment and the companies and organisations that work to advance it.

Some of the main challenges / barriers to impact

Our research revealed a range of challenges and barriers faced by those doing narrative change work.

Historical and wider context

● The historical backdrop of people being marginalised due to race, gender, sexuality, age, disability and other characteristics has meant, and still means, inequitable access to communication expertise and resources to share their stories and promote their own narratives.

● The UK media and screen industries are lacking in diversity, particularly at the strategic leadership level. *"We are not going to change narratives unless the culture makers are from more diverse backgrounds."* (Interviewee)

● The progressive sector is up against corporations, politicians and individuals with more money, power, and influence than is the case for many in the progressive sector. The scale of challenge can feel daunting.

For the narrative change sector

● Narrative change has rather fashionable, trendy reputation and can feel inaccessible to some. *"There's a risk of a kind of clubbishness forming around this work that will put a lot of people off…You've got to make this purposeful, relevant and accessible to as many people as possible if you really want it to move."* (Interviewee)

● The range of terminology used in this space can feel bewildering; practitioners and advocates need to find a way of describing the work that makes it easier for people to understand and use.

● There is some scepticism about the value of narrative change work. Some see it as 'sugar coating' people's experiences, preferring to stick to more traditional campaigning approaches. Others struggle to see how it 'fits' with other social change theories and approaches that are currently in favour with funders or others in the progressive space.

● Insufficient attention is given to evaluating the impact of narrative change work. Evidence is needed to inform the types of work and approaches that are supported in future, as well as build confidence and momentum in what is often long-term work.

● While narrative work focused on specific issues/policy agendas is clearly important, some suggest that wins are likely to be limited (and reversible) without effort to tackle broader cultural currents. Deeper cultural work will require considerably greater investment over a much longer-time horizon than is currently the case for many narrative change projects.

For civil society organisations

● Fundraising imperatives are often short-term and lend themselves to crises-driven communications. It can be challenging to engage with work that is seen as 'too niche, too risky, too unknown' when working to political cycles and responding to urgent frontline needs.

● For those with an interest in narrative change, it is sometimes unclear what 'good' looks like when it comes to commissioning support from expert organisations, and the costs of doing do can be prohibitive.

● Many organisations want to support people with lived experience of an issue to be spokespeople and share their stories/experiences but lack the funding and capacity to do this in a safe and strategic way.

● There are insufficient incentives and support for civil society organisations to collaborate and build strategic alliances on the issues they care about.

"Although we all have the right to communicate, historic patterns of privilege, injustice and marginalization mean that we have inequitable access to the tools and resources necessary to fully exercise this right. Bottom line: no change communications strategy is complete without investments in communications and organizing infrastructure that address these inequities."

Makani Themba (borrowed from ReFrame's website)

Tensions that can arise in narrative change work

Interviewees reflected on their experiences of doing narrative change work and highlighted a number of tensions that need to be managed:

● **Balancing shorter-term campaigning goals with longer-term narrative change work.** Narrative practitioners that we spoke to emphasized that it shouldn't be one or the other; the two should work in tandem. As one interviewee put it: *"We need to help people to understand that a focus on long-term narrative shifts would make the short term goals easier to win…."* There's also a need to see longer term narrative change work as requiring and being made up of effective shorter-term campaigns and content that express important ideals. Marcus Rashford and Jack Monroe's work on poverty are good examples of this in practice.

Jack Monroe's impact on supermarket pricing and inflation statistics. In early 2022, chef and campaigner Jack Monroe took to Twitter to catalogue the changes in pricing of supermarket basics, showing how essential foodstuffs had rocketed in ways that were a) eye wateringly unaffordable for many and b) not captured by official inflation statistics. This resulted in the Office of National Statistics changing aspects of its inflation data and a major supermarket chain re-stocking lower cost ranges. While this is not in itself an example of 'long term narrative change' work, it's the kind of campaign, communicated effectively that can contribute to longer term shifts in thinking about the systemic drivers of poverty.

● **Balancing the need to get agreed, tested messages into the public domain whilst allowing sufficient flexibility for organisations and people to feel in control of their own influencing work.** This is about creating messages that belong to the same 'family' but which allow some flexibility for organisations and campaigners.

● **Developing new content (blogs, videos, articles etc) that will 'work' versus 'just trying things'.** Organisations and people have different attitudes to risk; whilst some are keen to test new content with different audiences before releasing it into the public domain, others are much more inclined to just try things, see how they land and adjust as needed.

● **Typical funder requirements (ie project activities, outputs and outcomes delivered over a specific time period) are somewhat at odds with the long-term and diffuse nature of many narrative change initiatives.** Linked to this point, the issue of attribution can be challenging to unpick; positive impacts are likely to be the result of multiple activities undertaken by multiple actors over multiple months and years.

What would it take for narrative change work to have more real-world impact in the UK?

The research surfaced a wide range of practical recommendations for increasing the scale and impact of narrative change work in the UK, which we've summarised on this and the following page.

● **Investment allied to the scale and weight of the issues that the progressive sector is tackling.** Many interviewees recognised that investment in narrative change might require a 'leap of faith' by some funders, particularly in a time when there is so much frontline need, however they stressed that more investment is needed to truly shift the deeply entrenched narratives that harm people and communities. Interviewees pointed to the need for new funders in this space, alignment and pooling of funds to support larger-scale, longer-term initiatives (as well as share risks), and increased investment in ongoing collaboration between narrative change practitioners and with and among civil society organisations doing this work.

● **Flexible and innovative use of funding.** There is a strong message from the research about the need to fund different 'speeds' of narrative change work, which might comprise rapidly available funding that allows organisations to capitalise on sudden events or news stories, as well as funding for longer-term, deeper narrative change work. Interviewees also stressed the need for funders to commission or co-commission content (films, videos, books, documentaries etc) to get narratives into popular culture, rather than focussing almost exclusively on research and insight work, which might feel like the 'safer' option. Working with specialist creative agencies focused on creating content for social good will be part of this. The research points to the need for more investment in intersectional narrative change initiatives, which tackle deep cultural currents, alongside work on specific issues/policy agendas. The diffuse nature of narrative change work calls for a different and more flexible approach to evaluation that is not deeply rooted in timebound deliverables and outcomes.

● **A more diverse pool of storytellers, content creators and narrative strategists.** The research highlights the need to: (i) seek out and support campaigners, activists and grassroots movements with lived experience who are doing narrative change work but wouldn't necessarily refer to it as such (ii) connect them with wider networks and build their skills to be key messengers / spokespeople in a safe and strategic way (iii) fund media work and content creation by people with lived experience of issues. Looking to the future, funding could also usefully be channelled into supporting people from diverse backgrounds to get into journalism, writing and/or screen industries in order to create a pipeline of professionals who can bring new perspectives and experiences to these industries.

● **Wider access to narrative change resources and expertise for civil society.** The research indicates that a central repository of narrative change research, resources and tools that is freely available to civil society would be extremely helpful and reduce the risk of work being duplicated and narrative insights not be acted on. Linked to this point, distillations and digests of existing research and learning about particular agendas/issues would also be useful. Civil society organisations would benefit from low cost options for bringing in external help to support narrative change efforts. One suggestion is the creation of a bank of funder-approved "narrative change associates" who could be resourced to provide bespoke advice and support to networks or coalitions who are assessed to be in a good position to deliver narrative change work (similar to the Narrative Initiative's staff extenders).

● **Increased narrative capacity across civil society.** We know that there is a growing interest in narrative change work across civil society, but that people struggle to turn theory into practice or persuade colleagues to engage with it. Drawing inspiration from the States, and the range of mentoring and fellowship opportunities we came across, we feel that funders could usefully explore training and mentoring opportunities for those in the progressive sector in the UK. This would help widen to pool of people with deep knowledge of this work. One suggestion was the development of an accredited course for charity comms professionals which would give narrative change more gravitas and help create a pipeline of people knowledgeable about this work.

● **New partnerships and connections with disciplines and industries outside the (relatively narrow) narrative change space.** Successful narrative change requires a range of disciplines and skills. Interviewees would like to see funders exploring and investing in initiatives that combine expertise from a range of disciplines (the Butterfly Lab in the States provides inspiration for this). There is also more that could be done to strengthen connections between narrative practitioners, civil society and the entertainment and media industries.

Sachrajda and Zukowska (2021) advocate for a cultural narrative fellowship scheme to allow cultural strategists a chance to explore how narratives shape culture. Taylor (2021) suggests that a similar scheme for those working in more traditional cultural settings (galleries, museums) could be useful too. Several interviewees felt that there is untapped potential for civil society to work with corporations (with big budgets) to advance their narratives, although others were more cautious, viewing this as potentially too risky and challenging.

● **Investment in tech training and infrastructure.** We heard many times that civil society organisations often lack the skills to use social media platforms effectively to share their stories and narratives. They require training and support to do this. This could be through signposting to existing resources/guidance (research is needed to explore the quality of what already exists) or, if needed, the development of online modules. Tech could also be used to develop interactive maps that illustrate the range of work that is happening in this space across the UK to facilitate greater connection and learning (Sachradja and Zukowska (2021) recommended something similar). Many interviewees felt that having Big Listening technology available for the progressive sector could transform this work, however they recognise the high costs involved. It would also require investment in people with the expertise to analyse the data as well as infrastructure to share insights across the progressive sector.

● **Continued learning from other countries/ regions.** Narrative work is funded at scale in the States and many interviewees have been inspired by work they have witnessed or read about there. Funders, where possible, should support practitioner learning exchanges and collaboration between the two nations. Beyond the transatlantic relationship, interviewees felt that there is value in bringing together international cohorts of practitioners and organisations to learn and collaborate (as ASO Communications and NEON are doing through their Global Messaging Programme), as certain narratives operate at a global scale and require a global response.

The previous section set out an ambitious and wide-ranging set of recommendations for significantly boosting the scale and impact of narrative change work in the UK. What we didn't explore in detail is how feasible they are in the current funding climate, or the vehicle/s through which they could be delivered. One suggestion is the creation of an independent narrative change 'institute' (or similar) to oversee the ongoing development and expansion of the sector by delivering training, creating spaces for multi-disciplinary collaboration, bringing a greater diversity of people into the space, sharing learning and insights etc.

Whilst we were not able to explore this suggestion with funders as we had originally anticipated, there was strong message from some UK-based interviewees that they would like to see funders powering up, and strengthening connections between, existing organisations and practitioners in this space rather than creating a new expert body. Their reasons for this rested on: the time and costs involved in establishing a new entity in a tight financial climate; uncertainty about expertise being 'centred' in a single organisation (*'It could create an expectation that there is a group of people who 'have the answer' when it comes to narrative change'*); and an appreciation of the diverse (albeit limited) work that is currently happening in the UK (*"The work is so different and diverse at the moment. If there was a centre of expertise that holds all the definitions and tries to standardise the approach, it could get people's backs up"*). A few interviewees were more open to the idea and felt that a new narrative change 'institute' (or similar) could enrich the relatively small narrative change field in the UK. The issue merits further conversation with a wider range of organisations and people than we were able to speak to, in particular funders which are active in this space.

"Shifting narratives doesn't happen overnight. We need to have different speeds of narrative work – we might get some quick wins but it is often long-term. We need the short and the long term stuff – we need it all."

(Interviewee)

Appedix 1: Research contributors

Interviewees

We interviewed our five Advisors, plus twenty-one professionals working in and around the narrative change space, either in the States or the UK. Those who agreed to be named as contributors are listed below.

- Alice Jennings, Equally Ours
- Kate Stanley, FrameWorks UK
- Daniel Stanley, Future Narratives Lab
- Ruth Taylor, Narrative Change, Campaigning and Engagement Consultant
- Matthieu Lefevre and Luke Tryl, More in Common
- Daniel Vockins, NEON
- Sarah Cutler, Independent Consultant
- Neil Crowther, Independent Social Change Consultant
- Alice Sachradja, Creative Researcher and Storyteller
- Paddy Loughman, Independent Strategy Consultant and Speaker, cofounder of Reset Narratives Community
- Tracy Van Slyke, Pop Collab (USA)
- Joseph Phelan, ReFrame (USA)
- Bobby Clark, Strategic Communications Consultant (USA)
- Matty Gladstone, Choose Love,
- Luke Henrion and Camille Furtardo, Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- K Biswas, Writer, Founder of Racebeat, Director of Resonance FM and Editor of Representology
- Hannah Smith, Public Interest Research Centre. Hannah consulted with the following colleagues in advance of the interview: Rich Hawkins, Yas Necati, Ashley Erdman and Ralph Underhill (PIRC Associate)
- Nicky Hawkins, Heard

Advisors

- Rinku Sen, Narrative Initiative (USA)
- Mandy Van Deven, Philanthropy Consultant
- Abigail Scott-Paul, Leeds 2023
- Adeela Warley, Charity Comms
- Ella Saltmarshe, Reset Narratives & The Long Time Project

Funders who attended our early workshop

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- Holly Donagh, Paul Hamlyn Foundation
- Catherine Hobbs, Comic Relief
- Anna de Pulford, Dulverton Trust
- Alice Sachrajda, Independent Consultant representing Unbound Philanthropy
- Louisa Hooper, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation
- Hannah Ormston, Carnegie UK

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