



NARRATING CHANGE

A Primer on Narrative Changemaking Towards Easier Advocacy Work

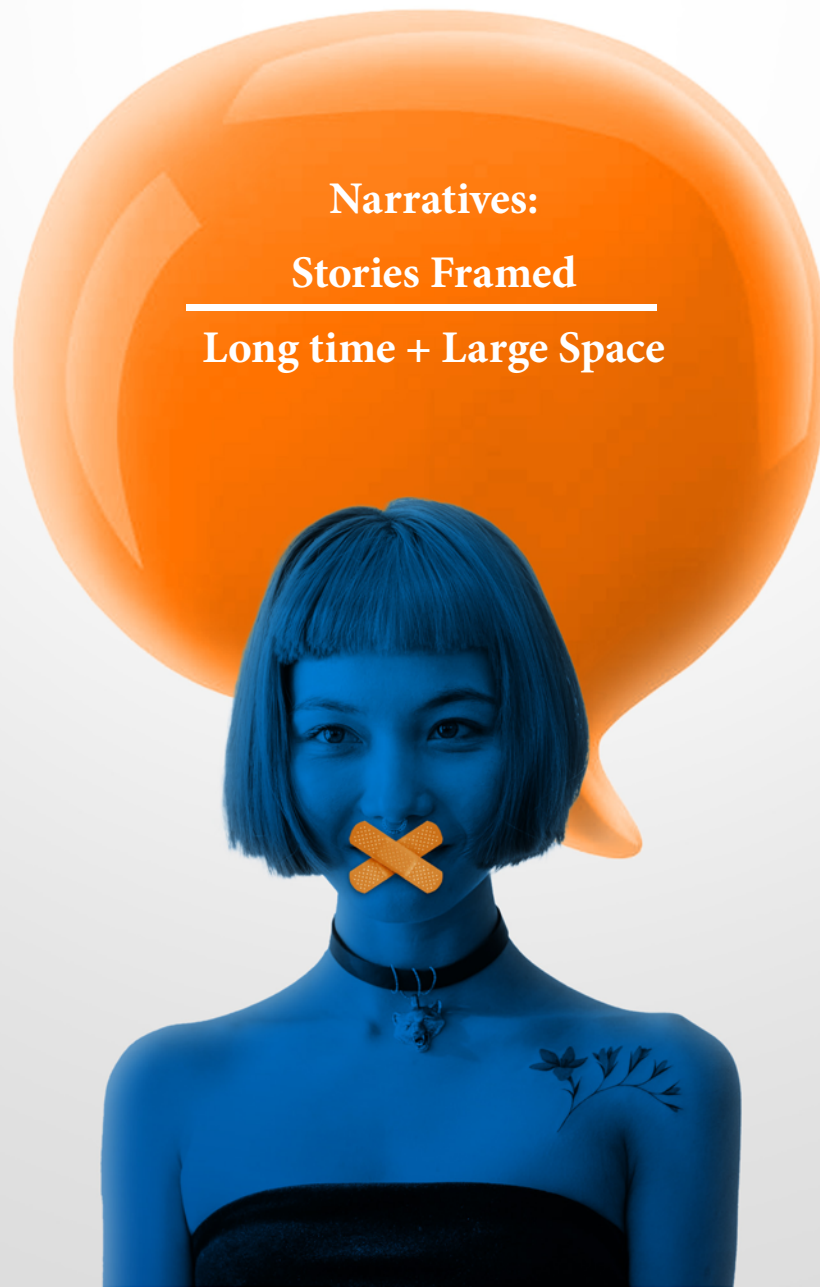
*This primer covers quickly the what, why, and how to
nudge narratives in resisting and advocating for change
on human rights and democracy issues.*



What are narratives?

“Narrative” is such a buzzword nowadays. The word has been thrown here and there, each time with less understanding from actors on the social transformation landscapes. To level off, how do we define narratives?

Academically speaking, narratives are grand stories echoed and amplified over long periods of time and over a large scale of population or area. Narratives are a string of smaller stories compounded together creating a common thread of what, why, and how the world is.



Practically speaking, narratives are the deep-seated opinions, beliefs, and ideals that shape or justify a person's behavior or action. It does not have to be true, just true enough for those who hold it.

**Why did you not promote Lydia?
(Behavior)**

Because Lydia cannot lead.

Why can't Lydia lead?

Because Lydia is not capable of command.

Why is Lydia not capable of command?

Because Lydia will not be listened to.

Why will Lydia not be listened to?

Because she is a woman!

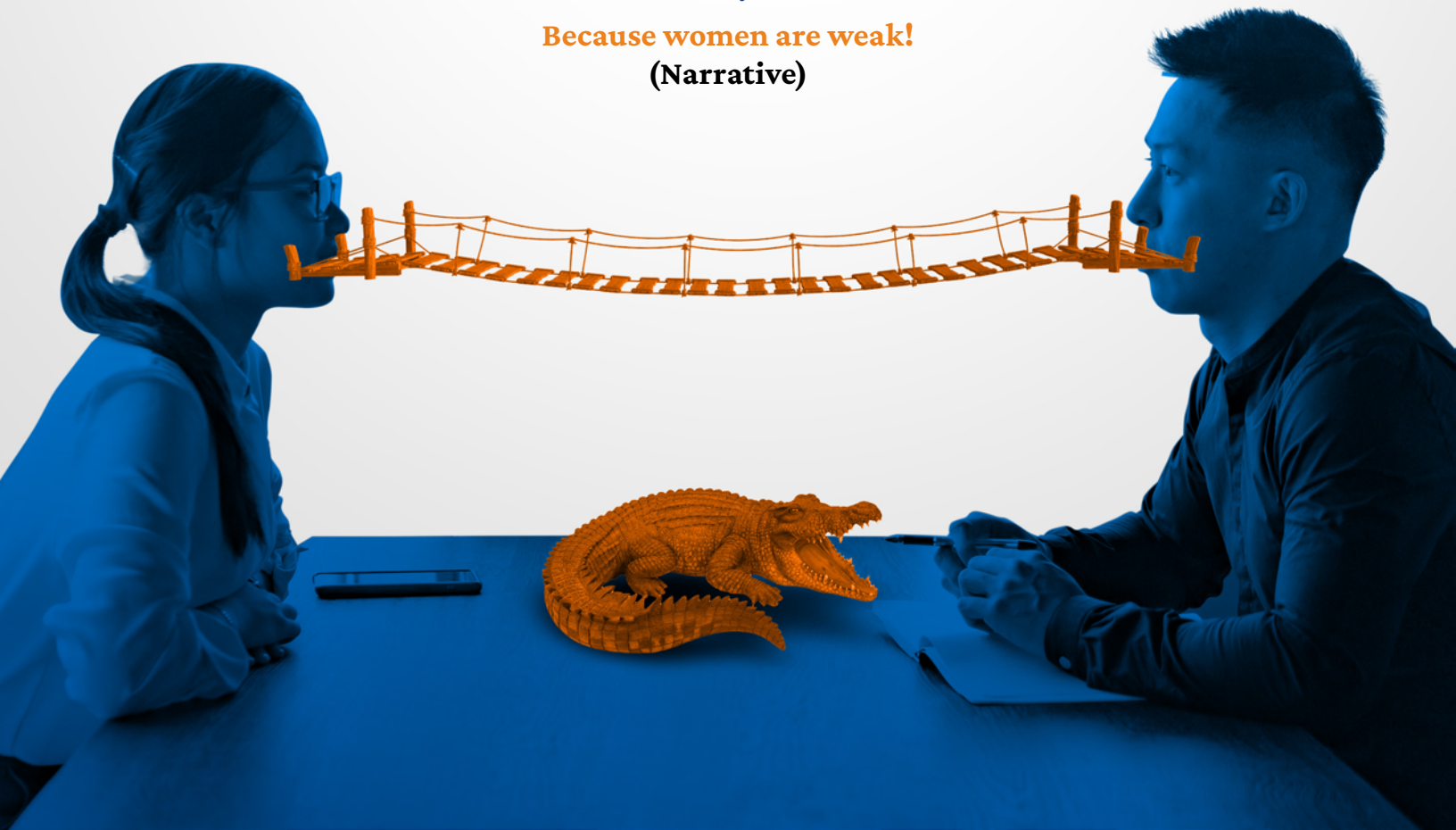
And?

Women are not meant to be leaders!

Why?

Because women are weak!

(Narrative)



How do narratives affect people and society?

Social narratives are cultural artifacts and are the twin of social behaviors. To put it simply, the third aspect of the society which is **culture** (the other two being politics and economics) is composed of only two things, ideas and behaviors. Ideas and behaviors continuously inform each other - common ideas justify common behaviors while behaviors, if done by a majority number of people, reinforce the correctness of ideas. Give it a great amount of time to flourish then you will get new traditions, customs, ways of life - culture!

Ideas
+
Behaviors
= Culture

“

Changing narratives changes culture. Changing culture contributes to the changing of society itself.

”



Narratives maintain the status quo

Narratives that are deeply held by people maintain the status quo. We are where we are today because the world works based on powerful ideals, beliefs, and opinions.

Racism and racist behaviors exist because a chunk of the world still believes that people are not created equal. Many nations also embrace the ideal of a single, strong, and male personality deciding for everyone else, resulting in a choice of governance with a strongman, patriarchal ruler. “Success is an individual choice” and “The poor are poor because they’re lazy” are strong and popular opinions reinforcing the “correctness” of inefficient social services and the exclusion of those who are in the margins.

There are political, economic, and cultural forces that benefit from these ideals, beliefs, and opinions. It is in their interest to perpetuate and forward these narratives, thus performing cultural work to maintain the status quo.

**Ask, ‘who benefits from
these ideals, beliefs, and
opinions?’, there lies your
cultural enemy.**

Narratives shape the status quo

Intentionally and strategically applied, narrative changemaking is a human rights and democracy advocate's tool in achieving their goals.

We say narratives are deep-seated ideals, beliefs, and opinions therefore they must be plucked out the peoples' minds to have less influence on their behaviors. But since humans heavily rely on ideas in order to navigate the world we must also plant the seeds of better narratives in place of the old ones.

Dismantling narratives without building new ones creates nothing more than noise. Building narratives without dismantling old ones is an uphill battle. The strategy is to simultaneuosly dismantle narratives and build new ones that contribute to a more rights-respecting and democratic society.

We must understand that changing the narratives requires an amount of time to succeed. Changing narratives needs to be persistent, consistent, and targeted to the audience that matters.

**The enemy has started way ahead
of us. What we lacked in speed and
money, we make up with persistence
and consistence.**

Narratives and Behaviors

We need to understand that narratives aren't a means to an end. Ultimately, we are living in a material world with material conditions and to shape it in our own (just and humane) liking, we aim for material actions - rights-affirming and democracy-forwarding behaviors. We build positive narratives to inform positive public behaviors and dismantle negative narratives to depopularize negative public behaviors.

Being one of the key foundations of individual and societal behaviors, narratives need to be integrated in many, if not all, of our social interventions. Changing the world requires a public whose ideals, beliefs, and opinions are strong enough to support and demand actual change.

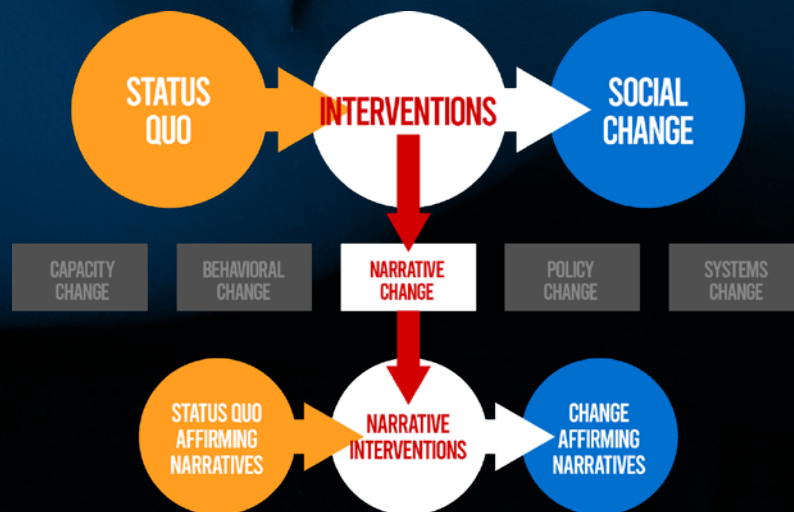
Narratives inform behaviors.
Changing narratives lead to changing behaviors.



Situating Narratives

Narratives, as a part of the cultural landscapes of the world, are everywhere.

In our line of work as advocates and activists, narrative changemaking lies in our general social changemaking together with other efforts like systems change, structural change, capacity change, behavior change among others.



On a grander structure of things, narratives lie on the cultural landscapes of the society. Narratives and culture in general do not exist in isolation. They inform how societal decisions are made (political) and how resources are generated and distributed (economic). The political and the economic material practice in turn reinforces culture and narratives.

OUR SOCIETY

POLITICS

CULTURE

ECONOMICS

IDEAS + BEHAVIORS

Recognizing Narratives

Narratives can be recognized by analyzing the underlying justification of current social conditions. This can be done by tracking the common reasons why differing social events and various individual activities are happening.

On-ground and in communities, we can recognize narratives through personal discussions. Ask a person why they behaved a certain way and they may answer with an event or another action as the basis of their behavior. If we continuously dig and ask why, there is a big chance that they will arrive at their deep-seated belief as the justification on why they behaved the way they did.

Q: “Hey Mrs. Cruz, why don’t you support your child’s queerness?”

A: Because God made only man and woman.

(The religious word is paramount)

B: Because I don’t want my child to be made fun of.

(Being LGBTQIA+ is unnatural)

C: Because I want my child to be “someone”.

(Being LGBTQIA+ is socially bankrupt)



Dissecting Narratives

We need to understand that narratives are not “messages” in itself. They are not slogans, key messages, or personal anecdotes. Narratives are social so they need to be general enough to warrant social behaviors.

Narratives can be dissected into three things: **narrators, stories, and narration.**

Narrators are the spreaders and amplifiers of narratives. They both hold and share the narratives with other people. The goals of the narrators are to persuade others, justify conditions, and turn listeners into narrators themselves.

Stories are objects, events, experiences, ideas, information, and beliefs that support, legitimize, or create appeal for a certain narrative. The goal of the story is to spread to and to be believed by as many people as it can.

Narration is the way narrators deliver the stories. Narration tries to achieve two things - scale and style. Scale is characterized by the amount of people/section of society being narrated to, breadth of spaces narratives are being told, and frequency and consistency of the narratives being shared in terms of time. Style on the other hand is characterized by the way the stories are being framed (values, principles, recent events) and creative storytelling (format, visuals, language, tone).



Changing Narratives

In changing narratives, first we must understand that the dominant society will not yield. Inside that society, the dominant culture will not yield and the narratives of that culture will not yield as well. Dominant forces will always be in conflict with each other for domination.

To change the narratives we need to change the baseline of effectiveness. In the societal landscape the baseline is power. If we can somehow empower the dissected parts of what our narratives is, we have a chance to push back in the cultural conflict for domination.

1. To shift power, we need to increase the capacities of our own narrators through:

Empowerment - politically (get them to influence decisions), economically (sustain their narration), culturally (ways they deliver), and socially (relationship with listeners).

Amplification - increasing the opportunities and spaces to narrate stories

In the same sense we need to disempower and deplatform the anti-narrators.

2. To shift power, we need to curate better stories through:

Surface - spotlight unknown benefits and interests, values

Popularize - build appeal of unappealing stories and make it matter to the people involved (Popular does not mean famous, it means it matters to the population)

In the same sense we need to expose and depopularize stories detrimental to our cause.

3. To shift power, we need to deliver our stories better through:

Scale - penetrate spaces useful to our narrative changemaking, extend narration to new segments of the population, create frequency and consistent narration that is not bound by red-letter days

Style - create interest by exploring new formats and style of narrations including language, tone, mood, and visualization

In the same sense, we need to dismantle the appeal of the narration of negative narratives.



Applying Narratives

Narratives need to go beyond communications. Narratives can and should be integrated in all our advocacy work.

Campaigning: Integrate narratives in the call-to-actions, issue primers, mass and political lines, and social media activities.

Organizing: Integrate narratives in community discussions, dialogues with partners and allies, and calls for participation.

Education: Integrate narratives in building knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Build meanings instead of information. Create education work take-aways founded on narratives and not just facts and data.

Sustainability: Add narrative-building aspects in all our strategies and proposals to get interest from funders and partners. Sustain the spirit of community of practice by creating a thread of narrative journeys especially through the hard times.



This narrative change primer is part of DAKILA and Active Vista's efforts to capacitate CSOs and movements toward easier advocacy work.

Along with this primer are two workshops the organization is offering - a board game-aided narrative discussion, and a narrative mapping activity of broad and specific social issues.

If you want to access the complete workshop for a deeper experience of narrative change for social advocacy work, contact activevista@dakila.org.ph.

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