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HOW

to

CHANGE

a

NARRATIVE

A GUIDE FOR ACTIVISTS
AND PEACE BUILDERS

In working for social justice, the stories we tell can be a powerful tool in shaping public opinion and influencing policies. Here's what you need to know about what "narrative change" means and how we can all effectively use it to strengthen our efforts to end discrimination and build peace.



American Friends
Service Committee

WHAT ARE NARRATIVES?

Public narratives are stories that help us understand our world. We encounter these stories everywhere: in the news, in politics, in conversations with our friends and family. Some are such common assumptions that they've become dominant narratives that over-determine how we understand important issues.

WHY NARRATIVE CHANGE?

Right now, dominant public narratives about issues of peace and justice are setting us up to lose. We hear them every day: Islam is inherently violent. Immigrants are a threat to our way of life. Police and prisons are necessary to keep us safe.

At the American Friends Service Committee, we're employing narrative change strategies to shift people's focus and the ways our issues are framed to help us build widespread support. If we can change the story, we can create the context for our work to win.

HOW DO WE CHANGE A NARRATIVE?

"Narrative change" is a hot communication buzzword right now. But we see it as a part of organizing, a set of tools to use to help us build support and create real change.

As with any organizing work, it's important to have a clear goal identified: Know what you're trying to achieve and why narrative change is necessary to win.

Then we do research to understand existing narratives and test narratives and messages we think might help us move people to take action to solve the problems we're addressing.

To develop strong messages, it's important to know the audience you're speaking to. Identify who you need to move on your issue, and who you can actually move. These might not be the same groups, but maybe there's a progressive base you can reach who can then be mobilized to move the elected officials who represent them, for example.

Finally, narrative change requires a lot of flexibility. You have to be prepared for your messages to fail, or for them to be so successful that they get co-opted. That means regularly re-evaluating and re-strategizing as needed. Once you've done the advance work of identifying goals and audiences, doing research, and developing

messages to test, you can be responsive to breaking news and shifts in the organizing context.

HOW TO CRAFT A MESSAGE: EXAMPLES FROM AFSC

Our friends at the nonprofit Opportunity Agenda have created a great, research-based rubric for messages that talk about issues in a way that inspires people to take action: First, establish a value shared by your audience. Then, identify the problem you're trying to address as a threat to shared values. Offer a solution to that problem and a way people can take action to bring policies or practices in line with the shared value.

For example, at AFSC, we're organizing against the profiling and surveillance of Muslims through our Communities Against Islamophobia project (see page 8). Earlier this year, we conducted a study that found that progressive audiences were most likely to be moved to action by messages that led with human rights. Moving forward, when we talk to our progressive base about this issue, we will use human rights language to help move them to act against profiling and surveillance policies.

Our messaging formula looks something like this:

- **Value:** Respect for human rights is an essential, universal value.
- **Problem:** Profiling and surveillance of Muslims is a threat to everyone's human rights.
- **Solution:** We need to end the profiling and surveillance of Muslims.
- **Action:** Join us next Thursday at City Hall to tell our City Council members to vote NO on Resolution 123, which would increase funding for police surveillance programs.

Our research for this program also showed that if we want to inspire people who are politically moderate to take action against profiling and surveillance policies, we should focus our messages on a slightly different value: safety and peace. As a result, when we develop messages to move moderate audiences to action, we'll use this language. The formula is the same as the one we use for progressives, but since the shared value is different, we also frame the problem a little differently:

- **Value:** Everyone deserves to live in safe and peaceful communities.
- **Problem:** Profiling and surveillance of Muslims is a threat to everyone's ability to live in safety and peace.
- **Solution:** We need to end the profiling and surveillance of Muslims.
- **Action:** Join us next Thursday at City Hall to tell our City Council members to vote NO on Resolution 123, which would increase funding for police surveillance programs.

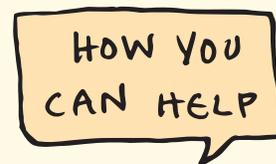
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See how even when the action or outcome you seek is the same, you can use different shared values to speak to different audiences?

Communities Against Islamophobia is just one of AFSC's narrative change projects. We're also working to change the narrative on Gaza and Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK/North Korea). Our messaging for these projects uses the same format. First, we researched existing narratives and shared values.

In the case of Gaza, we found that mainstream U.S. media rarely cover Gaza, and that people in the U.S. know very little about Gaza or Palestine. But we also found that people responded to messages focused on human rights and dignity—frames that we've been using to move people to advocate for ending the Israeli blockade of Gaza via our Gaza Unlocked campaign (see page 5).

In the case of the DPRK, we found that U.S. media overwhelmingly portray the DPRK as a threat. But when we frame our messages in terms of engagement—at both the individual level, as in people-to-people exchanges, and the national level, as in diplomacy—these messages stick in part because the overwhelming majority of people in the U.S. support engagement with North Korea rather than isolation. We've been using engagement messages to help build support for peace on the Korean Peninsula, and have been continuously monitoring their success since 2015.



Interested in working with AFSC to change the narrative on one of these issues? Visit AFSC online to learn more about:

- Communities against Islamophobia: afsc.org/noislamophobia
- Gaza: gazaunlocked.org

For more tips on messaging, check out our Media Uncovered blog: afsc.org/mediauncovered. ■

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