



**Narrative
Initiative**

Building Narrative Infrastructure in Minnesota

**Jacob Swenson-Lengyel
August 2019**

A report on Narrative Initiative's State Strategy, 2017-2019

In 2017, Narrative Initiative cultivated, designed, and began investing in partnerships with institutions eager to engage in narrative change. One stream of this work provided support for Atlantic Fellowship Programs in academic and philanthropic settings around the globe. The second stream implemented a U.S. state strategy working closely with Ford Foundation grantees undertaking narrative change projects. This report provides a high-level overview of Narrative Initiative's state strategy, outcomes of that work in Minnesota, and lessons it generated for the emerging field of narrative change practitioners and funders.

Project Origins

In the wake of the 2016 election, Narrative Initiative recognized the near-term need for narrative strategies to build alignment across race, geography, religion, and immigration status. We identified U.S. states as an ideal setting for testing narrative strategies that could bridge short-term interventions with long-term goals, particularly given the historic role states play as laboratories for experimentation. We also saw an opportunity to work with Ford Foundation BUILD grantees¹ to develop durable infrastructure for narrative change work, especially given Ford's Just Cities and Regions program.²

We evaluated the readiness, alignment, diversity, and political relevance of organizations in several states. It became clear that Minnesota was an ideal place to start. A number of organizations—particularly Take Action Minnesota, ISIAAH, and SEIU—have forged close ties over more than a decade. Narrative is a key part of their work thanks to more than 15 years of

¹ Learn more about the Ford's BUILD program:

<https://www.fordfoundation.org/work/our-grants/building-institutions-and-networks/>

² Learn more about Ford's Just Cities and Regions program:

<https://www.fordfoundation.org/work/challenging-inequality/just-cities-and-regions/>

collaboration with the Grassroots Policy Project. In the summer of 2017, those groups were in the process of creating an expanded coalition of 22 labor and community organizations called Our Minnesota Future. This coalition, rooted in diverse in-state constituencies, made narrative work central to their strategy for building statewide power. We also recognized Minnesota's growing importance as a state with the potential to be either a progressive model or a place where conservative leaders mobilize fear to divide and derail a broad and diverse coalition.

Theory of Change

The long-term aim of Narrative Initiative's project was to support our state partners in:

- catalyzing narrative shift around race, gender, and the role of government;
- fostering greater alignment between organizations and movements;
- articulating a more inclusive "we" to unite diverse communities.

Underlying these goals was a set of related hypotheses about narrative change.

First, Narrative Initiative believes narrative change requires a focus on both skills and strategy—something we've seen borne out during our time in Minnesota. **Narrative as skill** requires developing the capacity and competency to advance narrative change using diverse tools and methods from communications, organizing, policy, and beyond. **Narrative as strategy** involves deploying those multi-disciplinary skills with a set of strategic partners, preserving alignment on deep narratives³ inside an overall strategic framework and integrating them into daily practice even as one engages in near-term campaigns and rapid response work.

Second, we suspect that shifting deep narratives requires a robust infrastructure of aligned actors and cannot be done by one individual or organization alone. Instead, organizations must collectively name a shared vision and values, articulating them in ways that are authentic to the communities in which they work.

³ Read more about our definition of deep narrative here:
<https://narrativeinitiative.org/blog/narrative-change-a-working-definition-and-related-terms/>

Based on these goals and beliefs, we named a set of discrete short-term objectives that Narrative Initiative could contribute toward this longer-term project:

1. Provide trainings and workshops to increase the capacity of key organizations to deploy both narrative as skill and narrative as strategy.
2. Support the creation of a "narrative nervous system," a set of intra-coalition processes for setting shared strategy based on incoming research insights and then coordinating action, with the aim of deepening the application of narrative as strategy.

Behind these goals and objectives was a recognition that resources devoted to communications and narrative work at the state level tend to be short-term, campaign-based, and reactive. By collaborating with state partners willing and eager to connect short-term objectives to a strategy to shift deep narratives, we aimed to collaboratively experiment and glean lessons to share with the field and funders. Our hope was that, if successful, we could make a case to the broad field of funders and political donors who sponsor civic engagement and communications efforts about the value of allocating resources to longer-term investments in infrastructure to shape deep narrative.

What We Did

As we began, narrative work was already well underway among groups inside the Minnesota coalition. National partners were also engaged, particularly Anat Shenker-Osorio who, in collaboration with Demos, provided valuable messaging research to key organizations and then supported them in a five-week "Greater than Fear" campaign leading up to the midterm elections. Our approach, grounded in a focus on aligning partners to shift deep narratives, was to identify high value interventions we could undertake to support the coalition's goals, while avoiding duplication of efforts being led by others in the broader ecosystem. Below are some of the highlights of our work.

Resources

We allocated roughly \$750,000 in direct support as part of this program over the course of three years including allocating 1.5 FTE staff to manage it. A large portion of these resources went

directly to Take Action Minnesota Education Fund (TAMNEF), our key institutional partner. The goal of these resources was to enable Kenza Hadj-Moussa to support on-the-ground coalitional communications, in addition to her role as Communications Director. Grassroots Policy Project and the Reframe Mentorship also served as close partners on this project. TAMNEF engaged Dave Mann from Grassroots Policy project to work with Narrative Initiative as an experienced narrative change practitioner and a key link to the coalitional organizers. Joseph Phalen, Executive Director of the Reframe Mentorship, provided crucial support to Narrative Initiative staff and played a key role in program design. We also contracted with Hattaway Communications to commission a large-scale media study, create trainings and provide on-call support for groups within the organization, particularly for the smaller organizations with fewer dedicated communications resources. Finally, in 2017, Narrative Initiative's Jee Kim and Liz Hynes put significant time into researching, planning and designing the program. In 2018, Narrative Initiative hired Jacob Swenson-Lengyel as the full-time program manager, and he had strong support throughout from Program Director Rachel Weidinger.

Thought Partnership

We developed a practice of deep collaboration with our partners in Minnesota to discuss ongoing narrative strategy formation, integration, and execution. This included weekly meetings with Kenza and Dave to design interventions, identify opportunities, and allocate communications support. Narrative Initiative staff also participated regularly in coalitional communications table and organizing table meetings, which enabled us to work with our partners to set strategy, find opportunities for narrative integration, and identify needs for additional training, tools, or support. Finally, we regularly provide on-call consultations and dedicated communications support to individual organizations with less capacity.

Supporting Narrative as Skill

Together with our coalitional partners, we conducted a major research study and created a variety of trainings and tools dedicated to supporting narrative as a skill.

Research

- **Dominant Narratives in Minnesota Media** - This research project, conducted by Hattaway Communications, analyzed narratives found in 300 local print and TV media stories in Minnesota. It focused on three issues (immigration/refugee resettlement, healthcare, corporate taxes and regulations) and included a set of recommendations about how narrative change practitioners could integrate the research into their on-going work.

Trainings

- **Dominant Narratives in Minnesota Media** - This training presented the findings of the Media Map and provided a forum for coalition staff to discuss how to integrate the research into on-going work. It included a second follow-up discussion and strategy session.
- **Rapid Response: Tools and Techniques for Seizing the Moment and Driving Your Narrative** - This training identified rapid response communications and organizing as a key opportunity for narrative change work. Focused on how to move out of a reactive frame and move towards an aspirational vision, it also included a follow-up strategy session where coalition staff evaluated their collective implementation of the key lessons.
- **Moving Our Narrative on Social Media** - This training focused on helping staff and grassroots leaders understand how social media can be an arena for building narrative power and provided simple hard skills for using Twitter and Facebook. It was offered three times.

Tools (examples)

- **Best Practices for Creating a Digital Action Toolkit** - Organizations inside the Minnesota coalition work on different issue campaigns, through which they aimed to drive the same narratives. This worksheet provides a template for individual organizations to ask their peers to collaborate in driving shared narratives during key campaign moments.

- **WHO-WHAT-HOW: Narrative Strategy for Issue Campaigns** - This worksheet was developed to help communicators and organizers work through the basic components needed to develop an issue campaign narrative.
- **Values-Centered Organizing** - Values-based messaging is a widespread best practice in communications, but no similar framework exists (to our knowledge) for organizers designing campaigns and base-building efforts. This worksheet, developed by Dave Mann at the Grassroots Policy Project, is intended to help organizers re-think organizing and campaigning inside a values-based framework.

We are finalizing a library of these resources (and others) that we plan to share on our website this summer.⁴

Supporting Narrative as Strategy

One of the most important elements of our work with the coalition was supporting efforts at internal alignment, communication, and collaboration among organizations and across issue areas. We made an early decision to focus efforts on supporting and working within existing coalition governance structures, recognizing that the collaborations in Minnesota both pre-date and will outlast our direct involvement. At the same time, we actively encouraged and facilitated the creation of spaces where coalition members could set strategy across disciplinary silos (communications, organizing, policy) and identified places where existing structures for collaboration could be strengthened.

Narrative as a Powerbuilding Strategy

One of the major outcomes of our efforts to advance narrative as strategy was a **daylong strategy session** designed and executed by a team from Narrative Initiative and state partners including both organizers and communicators in August 2018. The session engaged more than 75 staff from 16 organizations and focused on how to use narrative as a powerbuilding strategy to connect various disciplinary approaches, issue areas, and constituencies. The slides and agendas from this session will also be made available to other narrative change practitioners via our website this summer.

⁴ These resources will be made available at: <https://narrativeinitiative.org/resources/>.

Four Baskets Framework for Narrative Change Capacity

Access to a broad coalition directly implementing narrative change strategies allowed us to articulate a **framework of essential narrative change capacities**. This framework, called Four Baskets, will be published on our website. The framework delineates capacities to: *create* a new narrative, *translate* the narrative across the many voices that will carry it, *drive* the new narrative in the public sphere, and *observe together* the impacts of narrative adoption efforts. The framework arose through dialogue about where to invest capacity building resources within the coalition. Application of this emergent framework became a useful guide for our work in Minnesota, and we believe it has utility to the broader field.

Impact

Our current state strategy program officially ends in June of 2019 as Narrative Initiative closes out our incubation period. We can already identify significant impacts resulting directly or indirectly from our partnership in Minnesota.

Direct Impact

We worked with state partners on a number of outcomes designed to have long-term impact in Minnesota and beyond:

- We designed and delivered **five workshops** on narrative as skill and narrative as strategy for over 100 different principals, communicators, organizers, policy staffers, and community leaders.
- We **created a library** of more than a dozen tools and case studies developed by Narrative Initiative and/or state partners. We also produced several conceptual models for approaching narrative change work that we believe will be of value to the larger field.
- We **supported a nascent narrative "nervous system"** for cross-organization, cross-discipline narrative strategy formation and execution as thought-partners constantly encouraging state leaders to invest in this area of work.

- Early signs of **increased collaboration** included regular sharing of digital action toolkits anchored in a shared narrative and used to amplify issue or constituency-specific demands as well as a jointly organized rally at the end of the 2018 legislative session. Those efforts continue to bear fruit. For example, what was originally called the "communicators table" has continued to flourish and expanded to include an email listserv, WhatsApp group, and self-organized trainings by local staff. Organizers and other non-comms staff, as well as new organizations, have also begun collaborating with the group.
- One important piece of feedback we received from state partners is that day-to-day engagement **provided an anchor** during a busy election that helped practitioners balance short-term objectives with an eye to the longer-term shifts that we were driving toward.

Our partners at TAMNEF summarize these results in their own words in a reflection they wrote on our 2018 work together:

The partnership we created gave credibility to the idea that narrative is an arena of power, and then honed it as a strategic space for OMF to operate in. This was the important accomplishment of the year. It provided a foundation for the race/class narrative research. It also paved the way for closer alignment among OMF organizations. At the statewide level, it positioned Minnesota for a wave of policy advocacy, driven by OMF member organizations, who are currently fighting for paid family and medical leave, statewide earned sick and safe time, a public health insurance option, a renewal of \$700 million a year in taxes for public health care, checks on pharmaceutical drug companies, the restoration of voting rights to people with criminal records, a halt to Enbridge's Line 3 pipeline, a statewide commitment to 100% clean energy, publicly owned cooperative housing in Minneapolis, an end to wage theft for immigrant workers and justice for construction workers, and much more. All these offensive fights are taking place on our terms, grounded in the narrative strategy we developed beginning at the end of 2017, and buttressed by a vision of expanding the terrain of political possibility.

Indirect Impact

Our state partners have shaped the narrative ecosystem in Minnesota and leveraged changes to advance a progressive change agenda. While we in no way want to claim credit for their hard work, we believe our work played a supporting role in two key ways:

- Our focus on supporting an emergent narrative nervous system to **center narrative as strategy**, rather than focusing solely on narrative as skill, **laid a foundation for other crucial work** in the state with tangible impacts. In particular, our daylong workshop in August 2018 on narrative as a power-building strategy built capacity for the successful Greater Than Fear campaign led by state partners and Anat Shenker-Osorio. That work, and the focus on narrative strategy more broadly, has enabled and empowered individual organizations to experiment with and adopt narrative change practices more regularly in their own work.
- We invested in working with partners to integrate three deep narratives—known as the Minnesota Values—into all aspects of their work. That frame and those **deep narratives have had a substantial impact on the public conversation**. The coalition adopted those values in 2017, before we fully launched our partnership, but a significant part of our work included helping organizations integrate those deep narratives into their issue campaigns, organizing, and communications by finding authentic language, actions, and images to elevate those themes. The deep narratives had a major impact on political conversations in 2018, intersecting with and impacting the substance of a wholly independent project by the House Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party (DFL), and were adopted by prominent political candidates. These candidates amplified the narratives and messages being developed by state partners and have continued to play a role in the legislative session, where, for instance, the DFL budget was called the "Minnesota Values Budget."

Learning & Recommendations

For Narrative Change Practitioners and Capacity Builders

- **Narrative change is a long-term power-building strategy.** Narrative change work isn't simply a matter of effective messaging. (Although that helps!) Instead, we found it most helpful to locate narrative inside a multidisciplinary power-building framework. This allowed us to connect narrative change not just to communications, but also to organizing, policy, cultural work and to make the case that these approaches are most impactful when they are integrated with one another. We also recognize that narrative change is a long-term process. The work in Minnesota began more than a decade ago and we are privileged to be able to support that work as practitioners take it to the next level. We understand there is much work that our state partners will carry forward as we wind down our engagement.
- **Narrative change work benefits from an organizing approach.** Our work in Minnesota has reaffirmed our belief that successfully leading narrative change efforts requires an organizing approach that emphasizes building relationships, aligning organizations and constituencies, and taking collective action. Narrative strategy needs to be led by community-based organizations and involves engaging and integrating all aspects of an organization's programmatic work, including communications. Often, communicators play a key role in making that happen, but we have seen organizers and others do so, too. Ultimately, advancing narrative as strategy isn't about your job title or disciplinary background. Narrative as strategy means focusing on the long-term work of shifting hearts and minds using a wide variety of tactics.
- **Coalitions are powerful narrative change-makers and finding balance across the coalition is crucial.** Our coalitional partners in Minnesota are Black, Latino, White; Christian, Muslim and Jewish; Minnesota-born and immigrants; from the Twin Cities to Duluth and beyond. That diversity is a tremendous strength. Diverse, aligned coalitions are uniquely positioned to advance narratives using authentic language in ways that reflects the unique experience of their members across race, place, religion, and immigration status. It also requires a concerted effort to watch for balance across the

coalition and there are likely to be challenges along the way. We found that dedicating additional support for groups with smaller staffs and fewer resources, often groups led by and based in communities of color or in rural areas, can help (at least begin to) ensure their values, ideas, vision, and experiences are fully inscribed in the shared narratives that are elevated by the coalition. In contrast to situations where a coalition-member invitation is based on short-term wins followed by quick dissolution, the practice of fully inscribing narratives is both a moral and practical imperative. Narrative strategies cannot support the emergence of a more inclusive "we" if they do not adequately speak to and reflect the unique experiences of all relevant communities, particularly communities who have been traditionally been marginalized or excluded.

For Foundations and Individuals Funding Narrative Change

- **The commitment to narrative change work must be significant, sustained, and strategic.** We dedicated roughly \$750,000 including 1.5 FTE staff to manage this program, which we believe was the minimal investment needed. While together we achieved a great deal, we know that even larger, longer-term investments are needed to challenge deeply ingrained narratives. Based on our experience, we estimate that an investment of \$1 million in grants given directly to individual organizations, plus an additional \$500,000 to \$1 million for a central coordinating hub run by the coalition and supporting partners would be necessary annually to operate the statewide narrative infrastructure in Minnesota.⁵ We recommend that foundations and donors looking to support state-level narrative change projects make significant multi-year commitments that extend beyond a single electoral cycle. We also believe that investing in state tables or collaborations led by organizations based in key constituencies and geographies is crucial. Only by doing so will we realize the potential for narrative strategies to play a role in the articulation of a bigger "we" capable of winning progressive change.
- **Resources are needed to support narrative as strategy in addition to narrative as skill.** Resources that enable practitioners to develop discrete skills, commission

⁵ These figures do not account for addition funding, not furnished by Narrative Initiative, for narrative work in Minnesota. Many additional resources, particularly from labor unions, were crucial for enabling additional pieces of narrative change work in 2018. The figures referenced here would ideally supplement, not replace, those crucial investments.

messaging research, or create compelling communications products are vital to enabling effective narrative change work. Many of the organizations we worked with would undoubtedly benefit from additional funding to hire dedicated communications staff. That said, these kinds of resources are insufficient on their own. Resources must also:

- Support individual practitioners and organizations in using narrative as strategy
 - Enable multiple organizations to align, collaborate, and build the infrastructure needed to effectively integrate and use research and other communications products
 - When making major investments in research and messaging projects, budgets should necessarily include sufficient and sizeable allocations for implementation of research insights. Groups charged with utilizing research findings will have varying capacity to uptake and enact research findings. Additional resources or implementation will support both increased efficacy and equity.
- **Funders should take an ecosystem approach to funding narrative change work.** To create balance across the coalition, funders should take a holistic approach to supporting narrative change work at the state level. That means investing heavily in organizations working in communities of color, rural areas, or with marginalized groups that are crucially important constituencies for advancing narrative strategies that create a bigger "we" capable of winning progressive change. It also means incentivizing collaboration and finding ways to enable resources, staff, and other assets to be controlled and accessed by a set of organizations, rather than being held by a single organization. Investing in the strength of both intra-coalition governance and narrative nervous systems is key to the power and sustainability of an ecosystem approach.

Conclusion

Narrative Initiative is immensely grateful to the many thoughtful collaborators and supporters of our Minnesota state strategy. The process of being in sustained dialogue with practitioners directly implementing narrative change strategies has been deeply edifying for Narrative

Initiative, particularly during our incubation period. It has also been really fun. The lessons from this partnership and program will have impacts on our approach for years to come. We are committed to sharing more lessons from this program with the broader field in coming months. We look forward to what is to come, confident that there is a strong lineage of narrative work, both in the Minnesota and among our national peer organizations.