



NARRATIVE  
POWER  
& collective  
ACTION

Conversations with people  
working to change narratives  
for social good

Part 2

STORIES & NARRATIVES  
are too OFTEN used to  
SHUT DOWN CONVERSATIONS.

WE WANT to EXPLORE HOW they  
CAN BE USED to OPEN DIALOGUE  
& CREATE, NOT SHRINK,  
SPACE for DEBATE.



For better or worse, narratives are a powerful force. But recently perhaps it's felt more like for the worse than better. Here, we want to talk about power of narrative and collective action for positive change.

Our starting point is civic space and defence of human rights. We held conversations with people across different sectors and disciplines – from activists and strategists to scientists

and marketers – to learn about their work in the narrative change space.

This publication is a collection of these conversations. It reveals fascinating insights, stories and strategies from their day-to-day work. Whether you're a narrative change specialist, or a front-line activist, we believe there's a lot to learn from and be inspired by in these conversations.

# MEET the PEOPLE WORKING to CHANGE NARRATIVES Around the World



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# MORE CONVERSATIONS IN PART ONE

This is part two of a two-part collection of curated conversations on narrative power and collective action.

We hope these conversations will spark reflection and discussion. While reading, ask yourself ‘what do these conversations bring to me, and what do I bring to these conversations?’

If you haven't read it yet, here are the conversations from part one:

THE KNOWLEDGE BROKER

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Editorial

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THE BLACK FEMINIST

QUEER INTERNATIONALIST

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**& Nicky Hawkins** [UK]

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THE NORMS SHIFTER

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[Peru]

THE DIGITAL STRATEGIST

**Aidan Muller**

[UK]

THE TECH COMMUNICATOR

**Sonia Jalfin**

[Argentina]

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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managed by Erika Perez-Leon, OTT Director of Communications. Conversations were edited by Louise Ball, and the publication was designed by the talented Magda Castría. Some of the artwork was commissioned by Fine Acts.

We'd like to thank especially all those featured in the publication for their time and contributions. Their knowledge, insights, and courage have been truly inspiring.



To be part of future conversations on Narrative Power and Collective Action please sign up using the QR code.

For more information about the contents of part one or part two please reach out to the book's curator, [Isabel Crabtree-Condor](#).



## Isabel Crabtree -Condor

Welcome to part two of this anthology – a collaboration between and for creative minds and active souls.

As the curator of the content and the person on the other side of these conversations, it's been a fascinating journey into part two.

In [part one](#), my editorial focused on power and collective action. Those ideas are still visible throughout this collection of conversations. But there are some new ideas and threads emerging in in part two that I'd like to pull out here as points to reflect upon.

### A million ways to collaborate

Our collaborators share stories of creative collaborations, respectful collaborations, artistic collaborations, inter-generational collaborations, student-teacher collaborations, feminist collaborations, mother-son collaborations, global collaborations, even collaborations with birds. Why work alone when you can work together?

### Spoiler alert: digital is not neutral

Several conversations spotlight how social media, and the algorithms and profit models

behind them, are playing havoc with our ability to connect.

But it's not all bad news. We can now 'listen' to what people are saying at a previously-unthought-of scale, which can be a powerful tool for strategic narrative change.

It's also clear that as we become more connected virtually, we can feel more alone and disconnected in reality. Grassroots connections, stories of community, stories of collective action, working as narrative networks, amplifying stories and figuring out what we stand for as individuals and as a collective become more and more important.

### Who tells the story matters

Many collaborators show us that a way to cut through the noise is to rethink who tells the story.

When stories are silenced and journalists are undercut, we cheat ourselves out of a fuller understanding of reality and history.

Plural stories, spoken in many voices, with the people who experience the issue from the front line emerges from these conversations as something as powerful as it is important.

In part one many of our collaborators talked about the need to use language of hope and positivity to show people what we're working towards. In part two, the idea of allowing ourselves to imagine alternative futures is something that emerged, and that we see huge potential in. Just because something doesn't exist already doesn't mean it can't. So, lets get dreaming.

I Hope you enjoy these conversations as much as I did!



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## Kuchenga Shenje

[Journalism]

Kuchenga is a journalist and a writer. She is a black transsexual feminist whose work seeks 'to cleave souls open with truth and sincerity'. She has written for multiple publications including *gal-dem*, *Vice*, *ID*, *Dazed*, and *Vogue*, and recently produced her first video essay for Netflix about the documentary *Disclosure*.

***'Because I write about politics and identity – and the politics of identity – there's an assumption that I must always seek people who share my subject position. I do need that connection with my communities. But as a writer there's nothing else that has made me more aware of myself as a human than how distance in terms of identity can be bridged through stories.'***

## Retreating into stories

I am part Zimbabwean, part Jamaican and I was raised in a pan-Africanist household.

My parents were really aware of us being black in a diasporic sense. We were connected to African communities on different continents because of our stories of immigration.

I grew up with a lot of books in the home. As well as having these wonderful tomes of black revolutionary political leaders like Paul Robson and Marcus Garvey, we also had a lot of Bertrand Russell and DH Lawrence.

The mantle of literature hung over our home with a huge amount of pressure. In my father's opinion I was ineligible to produce anything that would belong in a canon and I didn't like to refer to myself as a writer.

In my late 20s I finally ripped off the band-aid. When I was in rehab for drug and alcohol addiction, all I could do was write.

Because of the activism I was involved in at the time there was a need for me to do a lot of copywriting. So, I started to write as a form of activism.

This led to a freelance writing career that focused on gender, race and class, particularly to issues that pertain to the lives of black trans women.

I am black, I refer to myself as transexual, I exist on the fringes of both communities. As a result, I am comfortable with loneliness. There's no better existential condition for being a writer.

***I know what it means to forge human connections from that place of otherness. This has led me to see every blank page as an opportunity for connection.***

I read a lot from a very young age because I required escapism. The truth of who I am was too much for my community to take.

My mother had mostly African American women's literature. Through her I discovered Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Terrien MacMillan from a young age. As a result, I was able to see a version of myself in the lives of black cis-gendered women.

I retreated into literature as an oasis away from violence that was ever present in my life growing up. They were the only spaces where I need not fear any sort of physical or metaphysical blows.

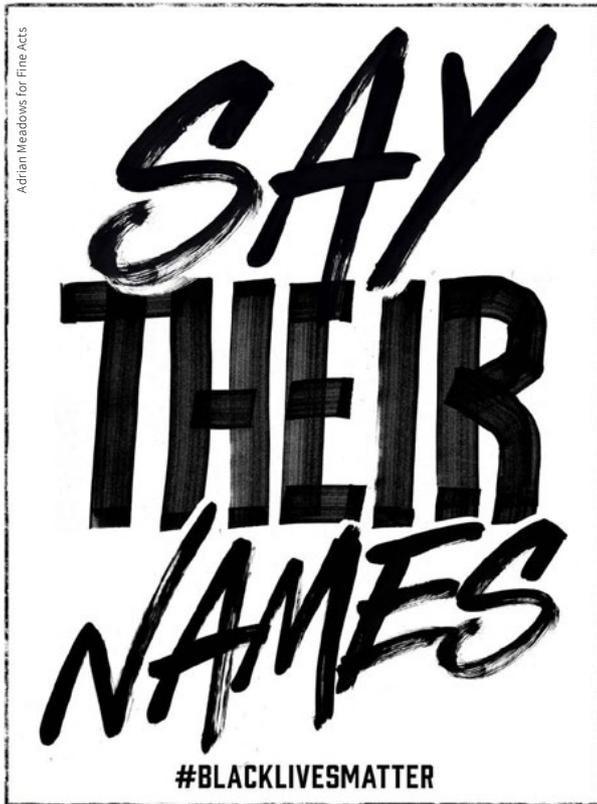
But I read with such innocence. I can now see how I was assaulted in a different way because of their Eurocentric, white supremacist notions of beauty. Nevertheless at the time I inhabited worlds in which I felt safe that only existed in literature.

***I grew up in London in the nineties and I can't overstate how important public libraries were to my survival. Both as a community space as well as a portal. A library has more destinations than an airport. I would go to these places and have a way out in that present moment.***

## Discovering narratives

I didn't actually think about a narrative in a political or historical sense until I read the anthology *Telling to Live – Latina Feminist Testimonios*.

I learned that narratives can exist that aren't on the written page. That gave me a huge sense of encouragement and inspiration.



I was reading the words of women of colour and some white Latinas who were being honest about the colourism that existed in their societies that they benefited from. I didn't realise how connected these ideas about narratives were to me until I began to read the work of afro-Latinas.

My sense of narrative took on a wholly different sense after that.

Before, I assumed that narrative had this line from ancient Greece to Rome, through to Renaissance and the Enlightenment, where these intelligent white men gifted the world with their thoughts. So, as a result of colonisation, I had been given the ability to tell a story.

It was painful to discover how limited my own understanding was of how history and narratives work.

For me, that anthology was a conference, where these Latina feminists told me that

the world was so much bigger than I had been told. The languages I believed had been lost could be reclaimed.

My understanding of narrative from a political and historical perspective had to be expanded in order for me to survive, write and tell my own stories.

### Choosing what to write about

A few years back my work was much more reactive. People would approach me with: 'someone, has written something awful and transphobic, could you respond, we need it tomorrow, but we'll pay in 30-days?'

I know it serves a purpose but it was taking its toll on me.

I also felt that because of my identities I was being corralled to do something that others don't have to do. I also question the longevity of those pieces.

I want to have the freedom to write. Not to have to keep writing about murder, trauma, hate and violence.

So, I recalibrated. I will write about things that are traumatic, but I try to find deeper meaning in them.

***I try to write In Memoriam; to archive trans lives, so that they are not lost and their names are not forgotten.***

When the Netflix opportunity came along, I leapt at it. I knew I wanted to write about this, who better than me, and for the same platform that had aired the brilliant *Disclosure* documentary?

It took a whole community of people to get me that gig. Because of my activism in different areas, I have so many, mostly black, women looking out for me, making sure that I'm listened to and elevated.

I really loved creating the Netflix [Video Essay](#) because the response is more immediate, its reach is bigger and it is more accessible.

### Collaboration with editors

***Because I write about politics and identity – and the politics of identity – there's an assumption that I must always seek people who share my subject position.***

***I do need that connection with my communities. But as a writer there's nothing else that has made me more aware of myself as a human than how distance in terms of identity can be bridged through stories.***

There's a fear that, because of the power relations, an editor who is white, cis-gender, and middle or upper class will enter into dialogue with me about my work, and that there's going to be a misunderstanding.

That they won't be able to see the truth and veracity of my work because their prejudices and their privilege have conditioned them not to see them.

When that happens, and it does happen, I do feel reduced and othered. That I am seen as a pastiche of a person. Because their perception of me is really shallow and narrow.

As I have become more declarative about who I am, what I deserve and what I believe in, I have attracted a particular kind of editor

who can look at my work and be ok with the things they have no knowledge of.

As a black trans woman writing about my relationships or my employment, I am the expert on those things.

I am often writing to connect with black women. But editors have helped me to understand the possibility of connecting with a global group of people. That strengthens what I write.

### Imagining alternative futures

I've got a novel in the works. Once that story is done, I'm not sure if realism will be able to sustain me.

***We are at such an insane critical moment as humanity and what's required for us to survive are ideas and beliefs that go way beyond what we're told the future has to hold.***

So what better tool to help us than science fiction?!

There's the artwork in New York City that says 'there are black people in the future'.

The fact that we survived, that our culture is multifaceted and so productive. To be living in this time having gone through it all and still fighting. I just really want to be able to create stories that prove that the fight was worth it.

Science fiction doesn't yet do much in terms of power relations and ethnicity, but it could. I read *Woman on the Edge of Time* by Marge Piercy and had my world spun around.

That's the world I am moving towards. I want to spend some time writing about alternative places, to where we could all be going. ■

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# WHAT ARE NARRATIVES?

*'Narratives represent a series of stories around a topic that are continuously repeated, shared and amplified by people in power. And then at some point they're believed to be true.'*

**'THE FEMINIST FUNDER'**  
**Sophia Hernández**

*'I think of a narrative like a song, that leaves you with a feeling. It isn't just a piece of news, but something that stays with you, sits in you, and makes you think. It's pleasing. You aren't aware that you are getting a message, but it travels through you.'*

**'THE JOURNALIST'**  
**Rohini Mohan**



*'Narratives are about confronting something that looks immovable and all mighty, but with the right questions generating tiny holes in that thinking. Through those tiny holes, little bits of light shine through. In those are opportunities for freedom, transformation, doubt and free thinking that are needed in civil processes.'*

**'THE MOVEMENT CONNECTOR'**  
**Alejandra Alayza**



*'When talking about narratives, it's also important to think about who gets to tell the story and how the story is told. For me, narratives are the official account. But it's important to have narratives be as plural as possible, to have many people talking about the same event.'*

**'THE FEMINIST ACADEMICS'**  
**Linda Gusia and Nita Luci**



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## Morgan Maze & Dewi Tjakrawinata

Morgan Maze and Dewi Tjakrawinata are a dynamic mother-and-son team from Indonesia. Together they founded Let's Speak Up, a group for young people with Down syndrome wanting to learn to express themselves and become self-advocates, challenging dominant ideas and narratives about people with Down syndrome in Indonesia and beyond.

### [Self-advocacy]

***'Being a self-advocate is about presenting or explaining to others what we need and what we want to do. We must show people that we can decide what is best for us. We are no different from others. Yes, we need help, but we want to decide what kind of help we need.'***

## Tell us about you and Let's Speak Up

[Morgan]: I'm Morgan, I'm 21 and I live in Jakarta. I have an Indonesian mother and a French father, so I speak both my parents' languages, and English.

I co-founded with my mum a group called Teens with Down syndrome. As it became more recognised, we connected with teens with Down syndrome from other communities and we called it the Let's Speak Up group.

Not all my friends can speak, or if they speak it's sometimes not clear. So my mum created the group to help them speak better, so we could understand each other and be friends.

Then, when my mum got funding from the Voice programme, she asked her friends to join and help her run the classes and to do activities.

We learn a lot during class. Last year we learned to introduce ourselves, to speak well, to become more confident, and how to work with friends and meet people. We talk about our hopes and what we want for our future.

We also go places together to learn new things, like we go to the gardens to learn about gardening. I like it when we go to a coffee shop or restaurant to learn how to make coffee or pizza. I want to work in restaurant one day.

[Dewi]: We learn about body language and emotions. Sometimes the people in Morgan's group cannot say how they feel. But when they learn about body language, they can see if people are angry or sad. They can read the emotion.

Because not all of Morgan's friends are verbal, we work a lot with pictures when we talk about emotions.

Another topic that we thought was important, was to make the group participants aware of their own body.

Many women or girls with Down syndrome in Indonesia are subject to sexual abuse. So, we talked about the differences between boys and girls, and addressed sexual issues so that the children have a notion of what's permitted and forbidden, by them and by others.

This subject is usually never approached by their parents or by schoolteachers as they think, for cultural reasons, that the children don't need to know about these things. Many still see people with Down syndrome as asexual.

## Staying connected during the COVID-19 pandemic

[Dewi]: In April 2020, we started a virtual class through Zoom. And in response to COVID-19, we created an easy-to-read guide so that people with Down syndrome could access information about the virus in a way that they could understand.

[Morgan]: I like to be part of this group. I like to have many friends, and I like to learn new things with my friends. Our class is always full of fun!

I know my friends like the classes too, because they're sad when we're on holiday. Now, because of COVID-19, we have online classes together.

I do video calls with my friend Zaq now.

[Dewi]: Because Morgan's friend Zaq is non-verbal, they do video calls. If they do a regular call you can't understand anything. Video calls let you see if Zaq is smiling or laughing.

Morgan speaking at the United Nations in Geneva for World Down Syndrome Day 2019.



When I ask them, ‘what are you laughing at?’ Morgan says to me, ‘no no, it’s something that only Down syndrome people understand.’

### Being a self-advocate

[Morgan]: Did you know that I am an international self-advocate for Down syndrome?

***Being a self-advocate is about presenting or explaining to others what we need and what we want to do. We must show people that we can decide what is best for us. We are no different from others. Yes, we need help, but we want to decide what kind of help we need.***

[Dewi]: Let’s Speak Up’s long-term goal is to become a group of self-advocates for people with Down syndrome and intellectual disabilities.

In Indonesia, people with non-intellectual disabilities can establish and register their own organisations and fight for their rights at the national and local level. But people

with intellectual disabilities cannot, because they are considered to have no legal capacity.

As a result, people with intellectual disabilities are not well represented or taken care of, and it becomes the parents’ responsibility to raise and educate them. Often the parents don’t empower or encourage the person with the intellectual disability to speak up.

That is why the group is called Let’s Speak Up.

### Celebrating World Down Syndrome Day

[Morgan]: Did you know that tomorrow [21 March] is World Down Syndrome Day?

[Dewi]: Morgan was in Geneva last year for World Down Syndrome Day. It’s where he started his career as an international self-advocate, talking in front of United Nations committees.

The United Nations session was shown live and filmed. Since then, people in Indonesia

"I speak three languages - Indonesian, French, and English, but for people like me with Down syndrome, there are no schools or places in Indonesia where we can learn a job, maybe one day to work like other people, to be independent."

Morgan Maze,  
Self-advocate, Indonesia



WSDS Conference United Nations Geneva

are more open. The government is starting to recognise this group of teens and Morgan got invited often to motivate other children and other groups.

Since 2006, World Down Syndrome Day has been marked each year on March 21. That date was selected to signify the uniqueness of the triplication of the 21st chromosome which causes Down syndrome.

In our conversation with Morgan and Dewi, Morgan mentioned that he also dances Hiphop and Kpop. We told him about one of our other conversations with Elena Mejia Julca (featured in part one) who is a feminist rapper and is part of a Hiphop theatre collective. She uses Hiphop to share her message.

[Morgan]: Woah! I want to know more. That's really cool.

[Dewi]: Some of my students in the Let's Speak Up group are also part of the Hiphop group. Because Morgan got more recognition, we got an invitation to show their Hiphop

choreography in events run by government or other organisations, and the group got paid.

With his dance group G STAR Morgan also performed in Singapore at the Asian Youth Theatre Festival.

They are mixing Kpop and Hiphop. I think Hiphop is great for people with Down syndrome because you don't really have rules. So, if one person doesn't do the right choreography, it's ok. It's more relaxed. They can enjoy the swing, the rhythm. It's free.



Let's Speak Up show. [Watch the video.](#)

[Dewi]: Last November Let's Speak Up put on a show. All our students invited their families and the wider community. Its goal was to show that people with Down syndrome have capacities in arts and performance. They danced, played music and read their poems.

It was a big thing here. It was featured on the national television news because it was the first time that a Down syndrome organisation did something like this, by and for the Down syndrome community and their parents. It's good for raising awareness.



People here don't believe that people with Down syndrome can speak up and share their perspectives. On that day we prepared a text and [Morgan spoke in English](#), and everyone liked it.

### Shifting ideas and perceptions about people with Down syndrome

[Dewi]: I can proudly say there has been a shift. Before, the Down syndrome society was not represented at disability meetings arranged by the government. Now we are.

I have a lot of parents who see my students and their successes. I often show what my students can do with presentations. Morgan can't do a presentation without help. But with help, he can do it alone, in front of the public.

For parents of people with Down syndrome this was unimaginable. So, they ask how I teach Morgan. How come Morgan can speak three languages?

### Supporting self-advocates: lessons from the global Down syndrome community

[Dewi]: To become a self-advocate people need self-confidence, to be supported, and to be included.

We are both part of an international reference group for an organisation called Down Syndrome International based in the UK, established early this year.

The reference group is called Listen, Include, Respect. But because of COVID-19, the group meetings and discussions are virtual.

This is what we want to see more of: people with Down syndrome being listened to, included and respected. ■

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# COLLABORATION

*‘Collaboration with people who come from different worlds makes you understand how the world is moving. If you are open to it you can grow so much from exchange.’*

‘THE MULTIMEDIA COMMUNICATOR’  
**Ahmer Khan**



# the DATA ACTIVIST

—  
**Renata Ávila**

**[Technology and law]**

Renata is a Guatemalan lawyer specialising in human rights, technology and intellectual property. She currently lives and works in Berlin, where she is building a social purpose startup called PolyLat, to revolutionise the way knowledge is delivered to decision makers, making it accessible and affordable. She was a member of Rigoberta Menchú and Julian Assange's legal teams and is a member of the Creative Commons international board of directors. She co-founded the Progressive International, a space of unity for those advancing human rights globally. She is a contributor to the international bloggers' community Global Voices, and is co-author of *Women, Whistleblowing, WikiLeaks* and *Everything must Change!* both published by OrBooks.

***'Social networks reward shouting. The algorithms shape the debate to be more and more polarised. They are designed to keep us apart, creating as many sub-bubbles as possible to increase engagement... That's a problem for civil society, because we are operating on platforms that are not playing by neutral rules.'***

## The narrative ecosystem

Twenty years ago, we had limited communications channels and it was expensive to distribute messages and tell stories that diverged from the most powerful narrative.

Certain institutions had the ability to change people's minds.

The more power you had, the easier it was to convey messages en masse via the church, popular art, TV, or the state.

***When the internet arrived, we naively thought that it would be a game changer for democracy and civil society.***

***It wasn't. Existing power dynamics became even more entrenched in our systems, somehow magnified by it.***

There was also the perception that young people inherently pursue democratic ideals and social justice.

Equating youth to social justice struggles is such a mistake. It shows how fast we forget.

In Latin America, we saw young people's movements hijacked by the extreme right... again. And we thought it was 'never again'.

Once again, privileged youth defended the establishment.

Groups of young people mastered a narrative pushing for austerity, polarisation and a conservative government.

The dominant economic power supported them, gave them resources and a platform.

One of the most interesting cases is Brazil. A legitimate government was overthrown and now there's a president openly pushing policies against poor people.

Yet the polls still favour him, even as Brazil has the highest numbers of preventable COVID-19 related deaths.

But it's not unique to Latin America. It's a very coordinated move that you can also see in Europe and the US.

Recently, I witnessed protests against vaccines in Berlin and London – two of the most educated cities in the world. It's puzzling. It forces you to stop and question everything.

## Democratising expertise

For new narratives to work on a large scale, it's not enough to shape messages carefully and create sexy narratives.

There is an earlier (and perhaps more boring) step of critical thinking and political education.

And we must democratise expertise.

Decision makers, especially those who cannot afford the leading quasi-monopolistic consulting firms, have no access to the information they need to decide key questions quickly.

And in the meantime, a conservative agenda is taking off, destroying and polluting decades of grassroots efforts.

Today you cannot even run a sexual education class with young teenagers without backlash from conservative groups.

But actually, these groups are indoctrinating a lot of people with things that are not in their interest.

They are effective at taking over these spaces: dividing and conquering, spreading misinformation and popularised messages like anti-vaccines, or the discourse against gender equality, or even the discourse against civil society itself.

***Civil society is at a disadvantage because in most of the world, progressive governments that advance the interests of citizens are not in power.***

**In our conversation with Renata, she told us that the spaces she works in, including Progressive International, are not shying away from the complexity of the current narrative ecosystem. We asked her about the approaches and tactics they are using to face this complexity and to build a new narrative ecosystem.**

### ***A shared positive agenda and plan***

The first step we are taking is launching an effort to articulate progressive movements across the globe. To work as a network across different countries advancing a shared vision.

In this shared space we are creating something that has been missing for a long time, a positive agenda with positive narratives... and a plan, a global green new deal.

### ***Evidence***

If you are pushing discourses of hope you have to have credible evidence – because right now it's really hard to be hopeful.

And we can't afford empty discourse. Whatever we say, we will be scrutinised with different lenses than before.

### ***Multi-disciplinarily collaboration***

We form a united front with scientists and academia in our narrative change work. Because both civil society and the scientific community are under attack, now more than ever.

If we look at the challenges ahead – pandemics, climate crises, inequality – we need to be equipped with solid evidence and case studies.

Civil society's role is to help the scientific community to deliver those stories to the general public, making complex research accessible.

### ***Returning to 'old' media***

It's not enough to rely on social media. We also need to go back to TV, radio, newspapers. The role of churches and religious leaders is also important.

When you launch a campaign that is not polarised but informative, mainstream media will give you the floor.

While I was working at Fundación Ciudadanía Inteligente, we did a project on how much data governments were sharing about COVID-19 in Latin America.



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It was research done by two geeky guys that we transformed it into a story and small people-focused campaign.

People could see that they need their governments to provide high-quality information so they can take more informed decisions during the crisis.

With Progressive International, we are showing the taxes paid by tech giants and contrasting them with their revenue. Using powerful facts to expose inequalities.

### **Language matters**

I struggle with how academia and civil society sometimes use language that's completely inaccessible to the average person.

***It's really sad to see a civil society leader or expert invited to a TV panel with a politician, and people side with the politician because they deliver simple clear messages.***

We need media training to communicate better with the general public. There are lots of experts that we can learn from. We could pool resources.

### **Stay on topic – this work takes time**

We tend to jump from topic to topic. Donors play a role in that too. We can't go deeper because the topic of the moment changes. Things mostly take time to gain traction.

How can we contribute towards building long-term narratives? How can we get those narratives to become mainstream – part of popular culture and knowledge?

You need an infrastructure for those ideas to take root. Washing hands was difficult to get into people's minds at the start of the pandemic, now it's seen as something very reasonable.

### **Compromise is part of this work**

You have to compromise. And it's not always easy. Sometimes the message isn't as sharp or radical as you want.

But sometimes it's still worth doing to connect to new audiences. Because at least the core message is being delivered to people who otherwise wouldn't access it.

### **Unusual allies**

Sometimes you find unusual allies. For example, my vision of privacy is rooted in social justice and the collective – not just the individual. On the other side, people with extreme liberal views were fighting as strongly for privacy as I was, but for them it was about the individuals.

### ***Different approaches***

There are different ways to deliver the same message. You can throw grenades, or you can say something politely.

Take WikiLeaks and Edward Snowden as two examples. Snowden has worked hard to keep the tone of his communications respectful, explaining technical issues about privacy and security – and why they matter – in an easy to understand way.

### ***Diplomacy versus a public platform***

When you really have opposite views, a big stage or public debate is not the best place to reach consensus. On public platforms, it will be always be 'I'm right, you're not'.

Sometimes it's more effective to meet with policymakers equipped with data, but without the cameras so the policymaker is not forced to perform.

### **Be wary of social networks**

Social networks reward shouting. The algorithms shape the debate to be more and more polarised.

They are designed to keep us apart, creating as many sub-bubbles as possible to increase engagement.

Psychologically people keep looking for information that makes their own views about something stronger.

That's a problem for civil society, because we are operating on platforms that are not playing by neutral rules.

You can't promote dialogue and build bridges through mutual understanding because the marketing drivers and business models behind social networks are based on polarisation for maximum engagement.

It's a big problem that we need to address collectively. We need them to change the rules of the game. Because people are profiting from our anger, our fears, and from this polarisation, which is only harming democracy as a whole.

### **Democratising tech**

***When you democratise a technology, you empower people to advance our narrative change goals through actions.***

3D printers may not be super sexy, but they were game changers during COVID-19. All these labs sprung up creating 3D printable solutions to social problems.

Civil society needs to go deeper, not only saying things differently, but enabling people to do things differently, collectively, with their own hands. ■

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# SOCIAL MEDIA

*'Good music comes from empathy and compassion. That's the whole point of telling a story. Yet in the online world it's all about number crunching and sociopath algorithms will push compassion to the bottom of the feed.'*

**'THE SYMPHONIC STORYTELLER'**  
**Orlando Higginbottom**



# the FEMINIST ACADEMICS

—  
**Linda Gusia  
& Nita Luci**

Linda is a sociologist and lecturer at the University of Pristina in Kosovo, and Nita is an anthropologist and assistant professor at the University of Pristina. They are the co-investigators of Changing the Story, a project that asks how the arts, heritage and human rights education can support youth-centred approaches to civil society building in post-conflict settings across the world.

**[Academia]**

***‘The institutional spaces might be shrinking and there are more right-wing, radical forms of expression. But there’s new, less formal and more potent ways of organising and claiming spaces.’***

[Linda]: When talking about experiences that shape us, witnessing what happened in Kosovo during the war is crucial. I worked for the Washington Post as a translator during the war in Kosovo and questions about the war and conflict paved my way into academia.

***For me it's important to make sense of what happened. Making sense of those experiences was, and very much still is, part of my academic and research curiosity.***

***The ways that stories are told and retold, how narratives distort, who tells the narratives and who decides, the stories we forget and the metanarrative produced.***

I am very curious to see how stories of conflict and war are being remembered and told to the next generation of people. In Kosovo 50% of the population is under 30. They have no personal experience of the wars.

Changing the Story aims to explore museums and turn them into sites of questioning, and to find ways to make them more democratic and plural spaces.

In 2013, we also co-founded a gender studies and research programme. Gender studies is under attack everywhere and Kosovo is no different. The programme creates a space to develop and put together projects with students.

We felt that we needed to think of the university as a public space, where different publics can engage and discuss how different inequalities affect us and our relationships with each other.

## Who gets to tell the story and how

[Nita]: When talking about narratives, it's also important to think about who gets to tell the story and how the story is told.

For me, narratives are the official account. But it's important to have narratives be as plural as possible, to have many people talking about the same event.

Feminist ethics and philosophy have helped us to understand the importance of telling narratives and recounting stories from different perspectives and standpoints.

[Linda]: Most knowledge production and research about Kosovo comes from outside of our context or has been produced under the 'outside gaze'?

That makes this knowledge hard to relate to because it lacks a complex understanding of structural inequalities and often uses 'culture' to explain the structural racism that made the war possible in first place.

So, stories and narratives aren't just a means of empowerment, they are also a means of power, erasure and control.

In our research, we try to bring to life feminist and post-colonial theories and practices to strengthen our outsider-insider approach.

As researchers, it is important to balance producing research and knowledge that is relevant to the realities that we inhabit, while simultaneously avoiding the trap of very localised knowledge production.

## New spaces for collective action

[Linda]: In Kosovo a private company got a permit to build a housing complex only 50m away from drinking water resources.

There was an immediate reaction. More than 30,000 people created a Facebook group and started to meet informally and got this decision revoked.

They were just concerned citizens who were angry and frustrated. There is a power and potency to grassroots activism.

## In our conversation with Linda and Nita, we asked them to tell us a bit more about the [Changing the Story](#) project.

[Linda]: In the 1990s in Kosovo, we didn't have institutional spaces and presence. In 1989, people got expelled from working in public institutions. Schools in Albanian language got shut down. Both Nita and I went to high school in a parallel school (or 'house school') system.

I have students born and raised in Pristina who have never heard of the parallel school system. One of the private houses is now in the process of becoming a museum, I have been sending my students there for over a decade.

Changing the Story uses participatory action research to study these house schools and how the stories are told and narratives built around them.

We work with young students from anthropology, sociology, as well as some journalists and art students.



Dessy Baeva for Fine Acts

We went to archives. We interviewed people. We reflected together. We wrote blogs and produced a web page that we hope will be part of the museum.

This story of house schools had been silenced for a long time. We looked at how these stories were silenced and how they became visible.

Often, when they become visible, there is the risk of their being co-opted and cemented in the official nationalist narrative, collapsing into 'us' and 'them' stories.

We are curious to see how the stories and narratives are being made and what will be the official museum narrative.

We hope that our joint work will have influence and the official narrative becomes more plural and inclusive.

## Narratives normalising violence and exclusion

[Nita]: Something else our project seeks to understand is what conditions make violence normal.

In our context, there was a mobilisation of people to create this almost parallel society that resisted authoritarian regime. First, for almost a decade, through peaceful civil disobedience, and then with the military.

That is an important story for today. You might ask, why should we care about the past? We can think of this moment, where we are today, by reflecting on how it became possible.

The legitimisation of white power, nationalism, proxy wars, and the appropriation of resources globally. We need to ask ourselves how do these ideologies come to power? Why do they survive? Why are they being legitimised through governments and corporations and international organisations?

***It's so easy to feel powerless and small in the face of these global geopolitical forces. But you can focus on your ability to speak out and act collectively. There has to be some kind of imagined potential where people can see future possibilities.***

## Decoding visual narratives

[Nita]: We tend to think of narratives as either spoken or written. But very often, they're also represented visually.

If you're working with young people, a lot of their knowledge is based on images they've seen and decoded.

Often, these narrative attacks appear in public space, in visual forms – like ads or billboards. How can you counter that?

What are the dominant visual narratives that you use and how might you rethink them? Do you need to be part of the narrative for it to be important to you?

In an academic context there is a discrediting of the personal narrative and personal experience because it has to be generalisable and comparable. For feminists the personal is political.

I think there's a lot of theoretical significance and political weight in personal experience.

It's about making connections with people with different experiences. ■

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# STORYTELLING

*'Facts are powerful and in short supply, so we need to hold on to them. But it's not enough to "give the facts" when telling a story. The context, the imagery, the choice of words and stories, all determine the emotional appeal of those facts. It determines the extent of its impact and power.'*

**'THE JOURNALIST'**  
**Rohini Mohan**



the  
**FEMINIST  
FUNDER**

—  
**Sophia  
Hernández**

Sophia is a program associate in the Ford Foundation's Civic Engagement and Government International Program, where she works to advance global strategy and grant making. She's from North Mexico, a Latina and a feminist.

[Philanthropy]

*'Theatre and music have become a powerful part of resistance and resilience. People are not allowed to claim physical space and go on protests or talk openly about civic space on the street, so these groups occupy space through the arts. I find that really fascinating.'*

Being a feminist in Latin America right now, and especially in Mexico, is exciting. We're starting to see narratives shift!

Earlier this year we had a massive march. Women from different sectors, groups and ideologies came together to protest against femicides. The next day women led a lockdown. We wanted to disappear completely from the streets to honour the women that have disappeared in the country.

It was a trending topic. Whether you were for or against, everyone was talking about feminism, what they think it is, what it means to them. It really moved me.

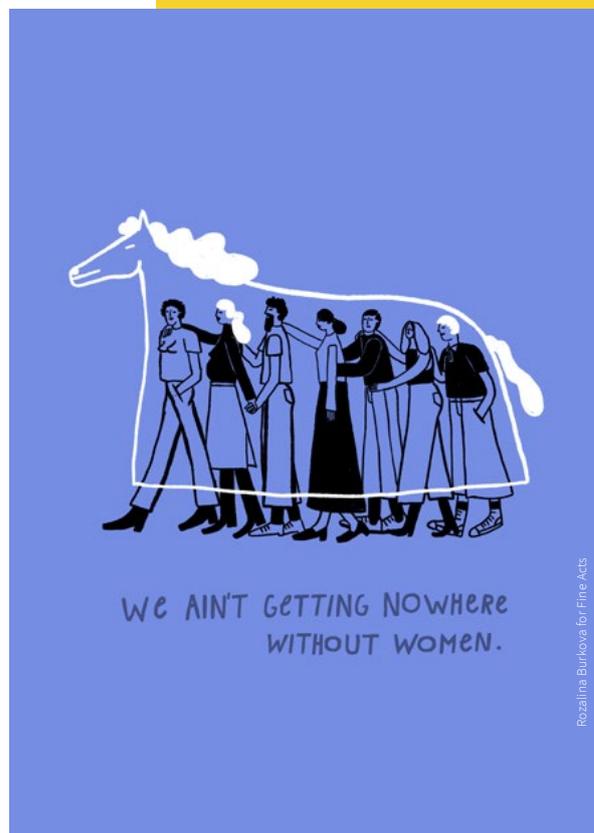
### The delegitimisation of civil society

At the Ford Foundation, one of the negative trends that we've identified is the delegitimisation of civil society. For us this connects with narratives.

The underlying narratives we see are that civil society responds to foreign priorities, that it's elitist, not representative, not accountable. The list goes on.

On the one hand we believe it's crucial to explore how to create and promote alternative positive narratives.

On the other hand, we also see opportunity for us as a sector to really question how we talk about our work and how we connect with others. Some of these narratives come from smear campaigns trying to demonise civil society, but some exist for a reason – right?



### Artistic activism and creative collaborations

Narratives represent a series of stories around a topic that are continuously repeated, shared and amplified by people in power. And then at some point they're believed to be true.

In Mexico, there's a really hard narrative about 'disappeared' people. Five years ago, there was a case of 43 'disappeared' students. The reaction from large sections of society was that they were probably connected to organised crime, so they deserved it. But the reality is that more than 70,000 people have disappeared in Mexico since 2006.

In the region, we have been working to support a combination of investigative journalism and art exhibitions to build a public commitment to reject these narratives and the impunity that emerges from them.

Because if people believe that they were killed or disappeared because they were doing something wrong, then it's hard to build a political will for change.

We have been partnering with different groups to support artistic activism. We are working with an initiative called El Día Después, (The Day After) led by Diego Luna, a well-known actor in Mexico. He has a big platform and a way of connecting sectors of society that we don't have access to.

Our Mexico Office has also been supporting the Museum of Memory and Tolerance. They have temporary exhibitions that talk about social justice issues – from LGBTIQX rights to femicide. It's an interesting space for curators, journalists, museum visitors and activists to come together to talk about a subject. A lot of young people go to the museum and we've seen them be shaken up by what they have experienced.

A documentary called Hasta los Dientes (Up to the Teeth) is about two students in north Mexico who were assassinated in an encounter between the military and organised crime groups. The media portrayed them as members of organised crime. But that wasn't true. The filmmakers supported a campaign to remove military personnel from the streets, as they are not well-equipped for safeguarding citizens.

So, there are several initiatives doing super valuable work around this difficult narrative that we are trying to shift. We do this because we want the government to know that people cannot just be disappeared or killed with no consequences.

## Artistic activism to creatively claim space

It can be hard for people to know what we mean when we talk about civic space. It's an abstract concept that really means nothing to a lot of people. Unless we can talk about it in a way that people can engage and relate to, we can't really work on protecting civic space.

Our programme works across the world, so we get a sense of what artistic activism looks like in different places. Some of the organisations we have been working with in the Middle East and North Africa are using the arts as a way of promoting the concepts of civic space, which you cannot talk about openly in the region.

***Theatre and music have become a powerful part of resistance and resilience. People are not allowed to claim physical space and go on protests or talk openly about civic space on the street, so these groups occupy space through the arts. I find that really fascinating.***

## Attacks on social justice leaders

The attacks against social justice leaders are the most pervasive expression of shrinking civic space.

We see that they are being targeted by both state and non-state actors. Existing protection mechanisms that were previously developed for human rights defenders are insufficient or irrelevant.

The assassination of Berta Cáceres in Honduras, who was one of our grantees,

really shook up the whole foundation. We asked ourselves what could have we done differently? It's a really difficult conversation to have but the protection of social justice leaders is the most important pillar in our strategy.

And it's challenging because in many contexts people support the narrative that human rights defenders or activists are anti-development, or defenders of criminals, reducing the support they have from the wider society. But once you start to share positive stories, make their work visible, show that their work is very much connected to people's lived reality, then there is a lot of potential for people to connect with and care about them.

For example, in Mexico City's main square a group of activists wrote down the names of women victims of homicide, including journalists and activists. People walking by started helping to write the names with paint. It was a powerful act of solidarity and creative action.

### Positive stories and the critical role for journalists

I was at a workshop in Mexico and some journalists told me that people are fed up of listening to stories in the news and on the street about violence, so they mentally block it out. This takes us to the challenging and important work we need to do, to start talking about activists and their work in a positive way.



*Passers by join activists to paint the names of women victims of homicide in Mexico City's main square.*

For example, there was this campaign that spoke about land and environmental defenders as the [#GuardiansoftheForest](#). It sought to promote a different narrative about indigenous people. People have been sharing 'guardians of the forest' videos, seeing it through a positive lens.

***We know that across the world, fundamental freedoms and democracy are under threat. Journalists and media play a really key role in raising awareness, documenting abuses and keeping society informed.***

***They also play a critical role as culture producers and amplifiers. They are part of a larger power struggle and democracy depends on their ability to speak truth to power.***

***For this reason, they face a lot of harassment, invasion of their privacy and online attacks – all of which is aimed at reducing their ability to speak truth to power.***

***But they are in a position that can actually really promote different narratives. If we could support journalism that takes protests and shows them as a positive example of claiming civic space, rather than something scary or anarchist, that would be very powerful.***

For the women's march in Mexico, one of the requests from the women marching was that everything be documented by women journalists. I think that played a really important role in the messages and articles that came out after the march. The reporting had a different tone.

It's a clear example of how, when we are working in repressive environments, if we can find a little entry point to exemplify how the space can be positively occupied and what positive narratives could be built into it, that's crucial.

### **Activists should demand more from funders**

I think philanthropy has been supporting this space in a very square way, through big organisations and NGOs. The reality is that there are so many different actors involved and some of the philanthropic support doesn't respond to the needs or work of young activists.

I would ask: what do you need us funders to do differently? What are the tools that could help you to continue your work? It's not a simple question. But I'm super interested to hear what people think. ■

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# COLLABORATION

*'I have a saying that I should never work alone. When it's work at scale, it's important to not self-isolate. You have to think of yourself as actively part of a team and keep articulating the theories you are bringing to your work.'*

**'THE ARTIVIST AT SCALE'**  
**Rachel Weidinger**



# the FILMMAKER

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## Waad Al-Kateab

Waad Al-Kateab is an award-winning documentary filmmaker from Syria. She became a citizen journalist in 2011. Her reports for Channel 4 News on the conflict in Syria received almost half a billion views online and won 24 awards, including the 2016 International Emmy for breaking news coverage. She and her family were eventually evacuated from Aleppo in 2016. *For Sama* is her first feature film.

### [Film/Journalism]

*'It was clear that the film was just one step. We needed to keep this work going. We wanted to offer ways for people to find out more and act on the feelings that they had at the end of the film. It could be sadness, anger, shame that they didn't act before, or hope that things will change. They can put all those feelings into positive action.'*

I grew up in different parts of Syria but eventually came to Aleppo to study in 2009.

My dream was to finish my studies and go to Germany to do a master's degree or PhD.

Before I did my high-school exam, my best friend and I decided we wanted to study journalism.

But my parents said that you can't study this in Syria – study something else and when you finish, if you still want to be a journalist, perhaps you can study abroad.

So I chose marketing because it's flexible and creative work.

In 2011 I started filming a little, but I never thought I would be a filmmaker or journalist.

Then the protests started in Syria and everything shifted.

It was the first time I realised that filming is where I belong. It is where I want to spend my life.

When my first documentary was on TV, I watched it with my parents and kept looking over at them saying, 'see, I'm a journalist now'.

They were proud. But they knew that if it wasn't for the uprising, I would never have been able to do what I really loved.

## Capturing life with film

My understanding of stories and narratives comes from my life and experience in Syria.

At the beginning I was just trying to understand and live that situation,

asking how can I tell this to someone who has never experienced it?

The only way I knew how was to capture everything. I wasn't able to judge what was important and not important at that time.

Now I can, because I have worked on the film and editing side. I can tell what is important and how to shape a story in one way or another.

But I think that living through all that is what makes me feel like now I'm able to tell any story from any place in the world.

## Changing minds with journalism

I was in Syria, filming everything I could. At that time, I had no clear idea how I would use this material.

But I understood that there was an urgent need for me to report on what was happening and to keep us in people's minds.

***For me, journalism is about changing things; changing minds with a picture or video.***

***There were so many challenging beautiful stories, which I felt I needed to tell.***

I thought that if people saw what was happening, they would try to stop it, or try to help. So every news opportunity that came up, I would do it.

I followed daily life in the city: doctors who were working, teachers, normal people who are managing to open their shops or continue their careers.

Even being pregnant myself. Finding those happy moments, even though I knew I could be killed at any second.



For Sama, directed by Waad al-Kateab and Edward Watts. [Watch the trailer.](#)

We started to watch the material together, not knowing where it was headed.

At the beginning we were thinking of a 15-minute news piece to tell the Aleppo story from beginning to end. Then we started to see it was something bigger than news.

### The power of a personal story

It was very obvious to all of them that the story was about me. I wasn't sure.

In Aleppo, I felt like just a regular woman living this situation. Then, when I left Aleppo, I felt I was a journalist and I should tell other people's stories, not my own.

But working on the film I began to understand how important it was to put my life and experience into it.

After a while I saw that it was the only way that people might really understand it.

People feel like they know my life now, but they don't. Yes, it's a personal story, but what I shared was just a little bit of what I lived through.

### Response to the film

We never expected the film to be such a success. From the start so many people told us not to expect anything.

Then we were accepted in the SXSW Film Festival.

I was sitting in the audience, waiting to see how many people would leave before the film finished. I thought people might not connect to it or care.

### The film

After we left Aleppo, I was shocked that journalism didn't really do anything for our lives. Everyone was watching what we had been through, but it felt like no one was doing anything.

My reports on Channel 4 News were popular. But half a billion views and we were still being displaced. It felt like no one really cared about us.

I was conflicted. I thought, what's the point of journalism? People view this and then continue with their lives.

I said I would never do anything to do with media again.

But then I realised that if I didn't do this, if I didn't use the material that I had, what was the point of risking my life, my daughter, all the people I filmed. I needed to find a way to keep going.

I contacted Channel 4 News and told them I had these hard drives of film. They were keen to collaborate.

*Homemade City is an initiative from Action for Sama & Future Aleppo, where children all around the world can create a collective city from inside their own homes. [Find out more here.](#)*

I was shocked when no one left. I was listening to the reactions. People were laughing and crying.

I was worried people would say that it's not true or real. Instead we had a standing ovation. We won the jury and audience award.

Standing on the red carpet at the Cannes Film Festival was unbelievable. It was a great achievement for the whole team. We held up signs that said 'stop bombing hospitals'.

At first there wasn't any negative reaction. But the big attack started after we won a British Academy Film Award, 11 months after the film's release. People called it the 'technical army of Assad'. They attack influencers and people speaking publicly about Syria.

For me the best thing was how much Syrian people loved and cared for the film.

I got so many amazing messages from people inside and outside Syria. The love I felt from those people was so powerful. It was better than all the awards.

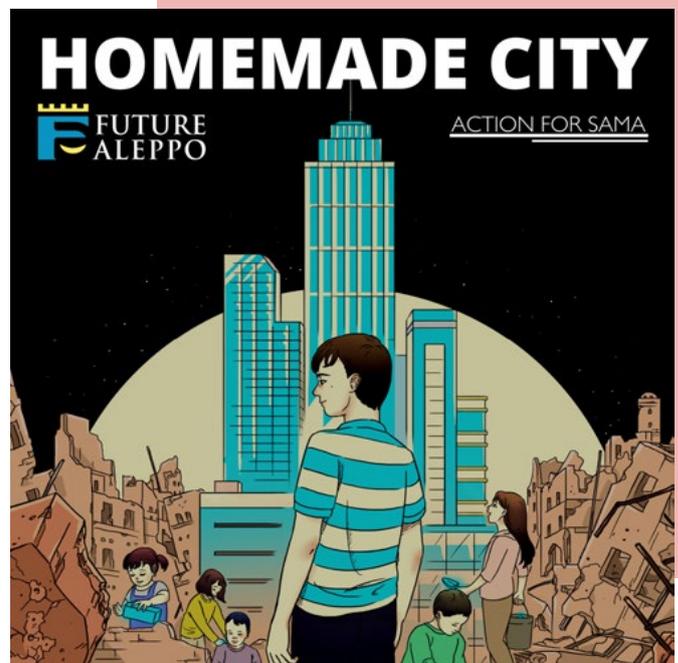
## Turning emotions into action

We saw that so many people cared about Syria and really wanted to do something.

At every screening there was someone who would stand up to ask us, 'what can we do now?'

It was clear that the film was just one step. We needed to keep this work going.

We wanted to offer ways for people to find out more and act on the feelings that they had at the end of the film.



It could be sadness, anger, shame that they didn't act before, or hope that things will change. They can put all those feelings into positive action.

With this idea we created a campaign called [Action for Sama](#).

So many people were telling us they were overwhelmed by the news. They didn't know where to get real stories about Syria. They didn't know who or what to believe.

We created a website to share articles and stories of Syrian people. We also provided a way to donate to support the civil response teams or hospitals. There are some more political groups for people to get involved in too, like writing to members of parliament or getting involved in advocacy. It's all important.

And we keep trying to tell individual stories. Or look at what is needed on the ground and create stories around these things.

I learned that one way to connect people, is to tell the story in a way that makes the reader feel like they know that person.

We shine a light on the things we have in common, daily life.

We continue to find ways to fund the Action for Sama campaign and we go to every event invitation because we want to connect with as many people as possible.

We also had interest to turn this work into a children's graphic comic book. It won't change much now, but it's critical that children and young people understand what happened as they grow up to be adults. ■

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# SOCIAL MEDIA

*'Social media embodies the same power structures that society has. That is only just being fully understood now. It's hard for tech enthusiasts to accept that before pushing governance solutions, they should work with civil society and affected groups to fully understand the dynamics of a world they're barging into. They might make a more sustainable technology.'*

**'THE JOURNALIST'**  
**Rohini Mohan**



# the JOURNALIST

—  
**Rohini Mohan**

**[Journalism]**

Rohini is a prize-winning writer and journalist based in Bangalore, India. For the last 16 years she has been writing about politics, human rights and the environment in India and across South Asia. Rohini is author of the book *The Seasons of Trouble: Life amid the Ruins of Sri Lanka's Civil War*.

***'I realised that there was a need to retell the story of rights and freedoms that we take for granted in India... We have these rights because groups of people were fearless in what they believed in and pushed an alternative message.'***

## A journalist's role

As a journalist, I look at how policies and decisions made by governments and powerful institutions impact people.

A lot of my understanding of the questions I should ask and the people I should challenge come from the clarity that activists, researchers and civil society have through their work on the ground.

I have observed that some groups are good at telling their story. And others are doing stunning work but are unable to communicate it.

I see my job as telling stories in ways that they've not been heard before, so they can break through the noise and exhaustion that surround us.

I also wrote a non-fiction book on post-war Sri Lanka. It involved distilling the experiences of millions of people into three interwoven story lines.

That book was written at a time while Syria was burning and Sri Lanka felt so far away, I didn't know if anyone would be interested.

As a journalist, it seems that you're constantly competing for people's attention and empathy.

## People are losing hope

There's been an increase in the vilification of civil society and activists – a narrative has emerged that they are troublemakers.

It's one thing to oppress somebody's work. It's another thing to reduce decades of work (that is in the public interest) to just troublemaking.

In India there's this term 'Naxals' used to describe left-wing ideologically driven violent groups.

We didn't think people would take this narrative seriously. Then international groups like Greenpeace and grassroots organisations were targeted, being called 'Naxals' and anti-national. It disturbed me.

This narrative was so powerful that it became hard for activists to continue to work.

People are losing hope. Even the indigenous groups that had fought for their rights for a really long time.

They were losing court battles. They were being accused of connections to extremist groups and being jailed in the hundreds.

There were also laws to prevent funding political activism.

People were asking if there was any point in protesting.

This was the first time in my life that I had seen that kind of despondency.

## Change is possible



***In that moment of panic and hopelessness, I realised that there was a need to retell the story of rights and freedoms that we take for granted in India.***

***Anyone who has grown up here has seen that you only get rights when you fight for them.***

***If a highway is being extended onto your land, you won't get compensation from the government unless you fight for it.***



These rights were not given to us. We have them because groups of people were fearless in what they believed in and pushed an alternative message. They spoke up and fought for those rights and freedoms.

For me that's what civic space is. It's a group of people engaging politically with their society, whether that's to fight for equality, health, education or transparency. They are engaged and they are ready to respond in a crisis or an opportunity.

I wanted to tell those stories.

There was a growing kind of paternal reassurance from the government. It was asking for obedience and silence in exchange for 'the state will take care of you'.

People believed it because they felt powerless. They felt like there was nobody to speak up for them. And they couldn't do it because they felt alone.

In those moments, there's such a need to share stories of collective action.

Because there are lots of people feeling alone; we have to find each other, and stories can help.

### What do narratives mean to you?

As a journalist, I think of a narrative as a believable and unforgettable story within which is the power to hold attention and persuade a large number of people.

***I think of a narrative like a song, that leaves you with a feeling. It isn't just a piece of news, but something that stays with you, sits in you, and makes you think. It's pleasing. You aren't aware that you are getting a message, but it travels through you.***

### Beyond facts

Facts are powerful and in short supply, so we need to hold on to them.

But it's not enough to 'give the facts' when telling a story.

The context, the imagery, the choice of words and stories, all determine the emotional appeal of those facts. They determine the extent of their impact and power.

The story of a protest can be told from the perspective of the protest leader, or the loudest person there, or a peanut seller who decided not to charge protestors that day.

You make decisions that affect how that story is understood.

As a journalist, when you go to the protest also has an impact. Do you go when there are thousands of people, or when there are only 50 and find out why they showed up?

## Tech and civil society

I live in Bangalore, which is the Silicon Valley of India. In the tech industry I see more politicisation.

There is no doubt that social media has been used to mobilise protests and political rallies.

The more powerful groups and political parties were first to use social media, and in a powerful and convincing way.

Whereas liberal civil society is scrambling to enter now.

***The dominant narrative that social media and technology would save us and solve everything is coming undone.***

***Tech is co-opted and doesn't serve the needs of everyone. Social media embodies the same power structures that society has. That is only just being fully understood now.***

There was a belief that technology could solve poverty, gender inequality, lack of access to services – just give everyone a biometric ID, bank account and social media.

Many people are questioning that sticky narrative now.

For years, ground reports showed how new identity cards in India – being pushed by the government and big private tech companies – were excluding millions of people.

It's hard for tech enthusiasts to accept that before pushing governance solutions, they should work with civil society and affected groups to fully understand the dynamics of a world they're barging into. They might make a more sustainable technology.

## Challenges of social media

The immediacy of social media does a disservice to truth. And the confusion that social media can create is only amplified by TV.

Mainstream media is more and more reliant on social media as they cut field reporting.

People tweet the news and there's little fact checking.

Some young people who are interested in fact checking seek out more information. Some journalists investigate to try get to the heart of it. But this takes time.

Social media is so noisy and immediate. The truth comes later and by then we've lost our ability to get someone to look at it in a more balanced way.

## Keeping people engaged

The main advice from people I've spoken to who have been working to keep people engaged for decades was:

***Legitimacy and longevity come from putting things in place so that people in the future don't have to start from zero.***

That can be legal provisions. It can be empowered communities. It can be infrastructure or capacity for non-violent organising. It can also be slogans that can be reused, songs retuned.

Advice to deal with repeated attacks was to hold people mobilised and engaged, and to keep editing the narrative over time.

***Grassroots connections  
have to go wide and deep.***

It's 'boots on the ground' that protects you from attacks on funds – people volunteer and bring effort, time, food, space.

Even when grassroots groups have no funding, they can continue for years because they are built as a trust network.

They understand the landscape, so when something happens, like an extreme crisis, they are ready to respond in the right way.

***Have documenters on your side.***

How many people do you need to be convincing? Maybe you have some writers who are able to be part of your work. A friendly journalist who can help you to tell your story and keep telling it.

My question to movements is how can you tell your story in a new way? ■

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# STORYTELLING

*'You build a narrative around the story. That narrative is totally dependent on the journalist producing it – how they tell that story. How you want people to read the story shapes how you put it together. How you want your subject to be shown to the world is in your hands.'*

**'THE MULTIMEDIA COMMUNICATOR'**  
**Ahmer Khan**



# the Movement CONNECTOR

—  
**Alejandra  
Alayza**

[NGO]

Alejandra is Policy and Campaigns Manager for Oxfam in Peru, leading their work tackling inequality through active citizenship and fiscal justice. She's a sociologist from Lima and studied human rights and public policy in Spain.

*'By generating more reflexive conversations that question or dispute commonly held ideas that don't really have much grounding, the possibility appears to persuade someone to look at things differently.'*

## Narratives of persuasion

Telling stories to persuade people was a permanent feature of growing up in a family of artists.

***Hopeful and transformative stories can be a way to build alternative perspectives on life. A way to dispute a dark reading of reality.***

***I think of my parents during the civil war in Peru. I learned so much from them about how to tell life stories, not only as a way to survive life, but as a way to transform it.***

I find the concept of narratives too rigid a box for something so fluid.

When you say 'narratives', written text springs to mind.

But narratives are really about the emotional and rational ways to explain how the world works, inviting others to look at it through your eyes.

***Narratives are about confronting something that looks immovable and all mighty, but with the right questions generating tiny holes in that thinking.***

***Through those tiny holes, little bits of light shine through. In those are opportunities for freedom, transformation, doubt and free thinking that are needed in civil processes.***

Part of understanding ourselves as a diverse society is not swallowing the idea that we all need to think the same.

## A tool of oppression and liberation

Narratives are important for identity too. Dominant narratives make us understand the world as we do.

In Latin America we see clearly in religion how the narrative of guilt and shame underpins the social order.

Historically, narratives have been a tool of the powerful.

Authoritarian governments were upheld by narratives that convince people to look at things in just one way.

But narratives can also be a tool of liberation.

Liberation theology reclaimed the language of religion. It started speaking of a God for and of the poor, establishing popular organisation as a way to disrupt post-colonial narratives and authoritarian structures. In doing so, these narratives empowered processes of social transformation.

## The problem with jargon

I come from a visual arts world and my family always had problems with people who 'spoke in difficult'. Especially when the jargon of lawyers, sociologists, or economists is used to speak about the problems of the people.

Technical jargon has the effect of isolating knowledge away from regular people. So, disputing narratives requires us to use language that's closer to the people.

By generating more reflexive conversations that question or dispute commonly held ideas that don't really have much grounding, the possibility appears to persuade someone to look at things differently.

## Civic space

For me the concept of civic space is associated with the negotiation of power relationships.



It's the mechanism that enables citizens to exercise their rights to assemble, associate and speak out in relation to big power holders like the state, private sector or religion.

The idea of counter-balance is central for my understanding of civic space. It's there that it connects to the idea of democratic balance of power.

### Narratives help people connect

When I started my student activism in Peru in the 1990s, 80% of the population had supported the dissolution of the congress and the coup by Alberto Fujimori.

This was a time of forced disappearances and mass human rights violations.

In that context, how do you create a narrative that permits you to be more than you and

your friends? How do you create a narrative that connects people?

That question has been my obsession ever since.

If I go out and say things as I feel them in my heart, I would probably have five friends around me.

But if I go out and say things from a perspective of responsibility, it's different.

I assume that people next to me have a life experience that's different from mine. That their support of an authoritarian system comes from legitimate concerns they have from their lived experience.

Then I have to find a way to connect my concerns – with my language and narrative – to theirs.

**A BARRER LA  
CORRUPCIÓN,  
A LIMPIAR EL  
PERÚ.**



Actúa.pe

## The power of questions

Our student movement against the dictatorship received important training by Eduardo Caceres. He took us through a methodology working with narratives and counter narratives.

We read the newspapers, pulling out dominant narratives that sustained the economic and political regime.

***Then, from our own beliefs, hopes and world view, we tried to construct alternative narratives that could respond to, question or disrupt those dominant narratives that had power but no grounding in fact or reality.***

Then, as a parliamentary advisor, I worked to create a critical movement around Peru's Free Trade Agreement (FTA, TLC in Spanish) with the US.

There were two camps of thought: 'TLC no' – the anti-free trade movement. And 'TLC si o si' ('FTA yes or yes') – the government's position in favour at all costs. There wasn't any middle ground in that conversation.

We wrote a paper called 'TLC así no' ('FTA but not like this'). This new narrative created a crack of doubt and opened space for those who weren't totally sold on either side to come together as a critical mass of people. We started to work with different sectors to bring their questions to the table.

## Framing inequality

In Peru the hyper concentration of economic and political power creates hegemonic thinking. This makes it really hard to talk about alternative models.

For example, Peru's economy is heavily dependent on industries that extract resources and export them. We would sooner export water-intensely-grown asparagus than protect our water sources for our communities.

We've been dragging this model since colonialisation. There's been growth but it's superficial and it wasn't inclusive or distributed.

When we started talking as a coalition of academics, civil society, even government actors, saying that we needed to think about post-extractivism models, we were called anti-mining, anti-national, anti-growth – anything to discredit the idea of an alternative way of doing things.

Later, when working on inequality for Oxfam, we thought carefully about how to frame inequality in a way that could connect, not alienate, people.

If we had come out bashing the 1% who have a huge amount of power in Peru, it would have made a splash but wouldn't have been sustainable.

Instead we focused on the lived reality of the 40% of Peruvians who have precariously joined the middle classes.

That 40% is most at risk from inequality. If the markets change, or something happens (enter a pandemic) these people fall into poverty very quickly.

With that framing, it's hard for anyone in our society to pretend it's not a collective problem we all need to care about.

For me narratives are like an Atlantic Ocean storm. There are crashes between cold and warm currents, waves and tides. Some waves from the north, others the south, some at the surface others much deeper.

An oceanographer will watch to see which current we really want to engage with. We can go out with megaphones on the street and be heard. But if we want to transform these currents, we have to measure strategically the temperature and orientation, so that when I hit the wave with force, I have the ability to influence.

### Creating alternative narratives

My obsession to be a 'bigger us' was one of the things that drew me to Oxfam.

For me [Actua.pe](https://actua.pe) has become a space to connect very different people and groups.

Instead of publishing press releases or statements, we used vignettes, visuals and memes that communicated data in a way that connects to common sense, not rational sense.

Actua has become a personality, a constant opinionator, informed, critical, smart, funny and playful, but rigorous.



It generates a reading of reality, providing an interpretation of data that supports the development of an alternative collective common sense.

Actua was watching and narrating reality for so many people whose realities were not seen in the mainstream.

Actua has become part of a current that feeds other currents that are increasingly questioning dominant narratives.

We made one meme on a union of women street cleaners who started an anti-corruption campaign. They went out 'to sweep clean' the Palace of Justice. The meme was designed to amplify their message and pay homage to their work. The union of women saw the meme, printed it, and it became their symbol at marches.

The meme was a way of honoring them, we didn't think it could be a tool of self-identification as a movement, to help them shine with pride, dignity and hope. ■

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# COLLABORATION

*'If we're all trying to do this alone, in silos, we're not going to achieve much. Unless we all start working together on the deeper narratives, we aren't going to make much progress. And so, one of the challenges facing us is how we move out of our issue areas and collaborate on shifting these fundamental or meta-narratives.'*

**'THE NARRATIVE CHANGE FUNDER'**  
**Brett Davidson**



# the MULTIMEDIA COMMUNICATOR

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## Ahmer Khan

[Journalism]

Ahmer is an independent multimedia journalist from Kashmir. He won the 2019 AFP Kate Webb Prize and Human Rights Press Award 2020 for his reports from Jammu and Kashmir during a six-month government-imposed lockdown. This year, Ahmer's film *India Burning* was nominated for an Emmy award as part of a series for Vice.

***'You build a narrative around the story. That narrative is totally dependent on the journalist producing it – how they choose to tell that story... Ultimately doing that story justice is in your own hands.'***

## Journalism as truth telling

I come from Kashmir, which has been a disputed region between India and Pakistan for the last 70 years. And it is one of the most militarised zones in the world.

Soon after my schooling in 2008, mass uprising was at its peak in Kashmir.

As things got really bad in Kashmir, I thought that journalism was something I wanted to explore – some sort of truth-telling in the world.

Of course, there's a cut-throat competition out there, to make your name and to get your work in the bigger publications.

But I was determined to do something good. Not only for me, but also for my people. So that's how I started my journey as a journalist.

## Multimedia journalism

With time I realised that in India almost everyone has a phone. Out of a population of 1.3 billion, 500 million people have phones. Internet is one of the cheapest things available in India.

Today, everything is at our fingertips because of mobile phones and connectivity.

And if you scroll through someone's phone all you will see is videos.

Videos have become a really easy and quick way for people to know what's happening in a matter of seconds.

**Print media worked for centuries.**

**But times are changing, and people too.**

**Naturally storytelling shifts in the same direction.**

Video has dominated the storytelling world for over a decade now. And in the last four-five years, several platforms have created the functionality to upload video content immediately, or even live.

What happened in the Beirut explosion this year was an example of this. We got to see so many angles of the explosion shot at the same time. This content is now being used as evidence to look into what caused the explosion. Then the news channels bought them and continued to play them.

Communications and journalism have changed as people are able to read and write on their phones as things happen.

And so, multimedia storytelling has become incredibly important today.

**But it's not all good news. In India we have seen several examples where community videos shape sentiments toward another community. And this can lead to riots. Today there is a complete shut down in one region because of this.**

**These videos can be hugely divisive and instantly distributed among a group, activating them to come out in support of their own community.**

**So, video is a tool and it really depends on how you want to use that tool.**

## The closing of civic space

Civic space in India is going through a hard time. Since the Modi government came into power in 2014, you cannot speak freely.

The TRUTH  
is not for  
sale



It's  
FREE.

Roshni Haleva for Fine Acts

Journalists cannot talk freely in India because you never know when the government or even people will attack you.

The current government is increasingly portraying and projecting India as a Hindu country. This begins to have very real impacts for people. Today I read a report that there was a hospital in an Indian city where Hindus are kept in a different ward to Muslims.

**People say that India is a growing economy, but it's sliding backwards in terms of democracy.**

**So, when you say civic space, I don't see much of it in India. There are no free discussions. The liberals are attacked online. When I report about India, I receive dozens of attacks online.**

A senior and respected journalist from Bangalore was shot dead in broad daylight in 2017. She used to question government policy. Her death created a lot of fear in the journalism community.

But despite that, there are many journalists who still write and question the official narrative.

Last year in Kashmir, there was an enforced lockdown for more than six months from 5 August.

There was a total blackout of communications, no mobile phones, no landline phones, no internet, no TV cables, no satellite communications, nothing at all.

As a Kashmiri, covering the crisis was my first priority. Since August 2019 in Kashmir, people still don't have high-speed mobile internet on their phones.

### The power of film

**I love films and making them. I personally think that visuals are stronger than words, and films have more power than print.**

It gives a clear image of the situation. Manipulation is possible or course, but it's harder to fake video content.

I use films as a way to connect with people, so they can relate to our stories.

Coming from a conflict zone, social media has done a great service for us. Multimedia storytelling means we can show what is happening here, in real time.

The global audience prefers visual content too.

I didn't see much coverage coming from my area before and I wanted to connect what was happening locally with the rest of the world.

So, for me video is a great way to do popular storytelling in real time.

## How content gets produced

There are two processes for producing content. Either you get hired for something by an editor or a publication, or you pitch a particular story or angle you want to cover.

When making a film we do a lot of research. You have to ask: who are your subjects? How comfortable are you with them? How much do they trust you?

I did a human rights story on Rohingya rape victims. As a man, it was difficult to speak to those women. It took me at least a week to prepare to speak with them and then to film.

Building trust, being patient, and trying to film people in an authentic way is also an important part of the process.

## Collaboration is critical

Collaboration is great because you can find talent everywhere. People have all sorts of amazing talents.

During my time working as a freelance journalist for Amnesty International, I collaborated with people all over South Asia.

I learned about their culture, their language. That's important when you collaborate with people from different places, races and castes.

**Collaboration with people who come from different worlds makes you understand how the world is moving. I learned so much from people's first-hand accounts of how their worlds were changing.**

**If you are open to it you can grow so much from exchange. You learn new forms of storytelling and experience new ways of living. It's a massive learning process.**

## International visibility

I produced a film called *India Burning*, as part of a series for Vice. It was premiered on Showtime and the series received an Emmy nomination in July 2020.

It's about the rise of Hindu Nationalism in India and the growing concern over 200 million Muslims being labelled as infiltrators. This is a really worrying trend because these 200 million Muslims are also Indian.

Apart from producing something you are really proud of, an Emmy is kind of the best thing that can happen for a filmmaker. It's a huge vindication of our work on this challenging narrative that we are seeing emerge.

## Journalists as narrative creators

So much depends on why you want to produce your content.

There are several stories where I felt I could have done a better job. I wasn't thinking on that scale back then. But every day you grow up and understand the situation better.

You build a narrative around the story. That narrative is totally dependent on the journalist producing it – how they tell that story.

How you want people to read the story shapes how you put it together.

How you want your subject to be shown to the world is in your hands.

I don't want to be someone who produces propaganda.

I try to think about what is the actual story I want the viewer to receive. Then I try to

create that as a filmmaker. For example, I think about how I want people to see Kashmir, and then I make it happen.

Ultimately doing that story justice is in your own hands. ■

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# SOCIAL MEDIA

*'Social networks are designed to keep us apart ... That's a problem for civil society, because we are operating on platforms that are not playing by neutral rules .... It's a big problem that we need to address collectively. We need them to change the rules of their game. Because people are profiting from our anger, our fears, and from this polarisation, which is only harming democracy as a whole.'*

**'THE DATA ACTIVIST'**  
**Renata Ávila**



the  
**SYMPHONIC**  
**STORYTELLER**

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**Orlando  
Higginbottom**

Orlando Higginbottom is a British music producer, writer, DJ and performer based in the US. Twelve years ago, he started an artistic project called Totally Enormous Extinct Dinosaurs.

**[Music]**

*'I really believe that scientists are critical to analyse and implement the answer. But it will be the activists and artists who come up with the answers, because they are led by imagination first. They're imagining a better world, and they're fighting for it.'*

## Music and narratives

One of the incredible things about music is that you, as a listener, inject your own stories into it.

There is a natural narrative flow to a piece of music. There is a beginning and an end, and there are emotional peaks and troughs.

In classical music there's often no lyrics and a title like 'A Winter Scene' or 'Pastoral Symphony'. You have to use your imagination to decide where the mountain tops, forests and rivers are, or what that winter scene looks like.

There are people who are certain that they know which bits of Sibelius' symphonies are a mountain. But Sibelius never said it.

So, you have to actively hear the narrative within music.

### The listener's imagination

I think the hours I spent with my headphones on doing deep listening in bed at night was a huge part of my growth as a human.

When I started listening to classical music consciously, I would put on my favourite CDs and act out stories in my head.

I would put on *The Planets* by Holst and stroll around pretending I was King Arthur. Holst wasn't thinking about that when he wrote that piece. But it inspired within me a narrative of my own.

***Watching a movie, you don't have to use your imagination. Reading a book, you use your imagination quite a lot. Listening to a piece of music you are massively reliant on your imagination. That's the eternal magic of music.***

***Music works on this other level. The more you think about that, the more remarkable the diversity in music around the world becomes. That diversity is a sign that we have millions of different stories to tell.***

Of course, there's also the hyper-commercialised popular music, where you don't have any work to do as a listener, it's all given to you on a plate.

### The 'attention economy' versus compassion

Research has shown that social platform algorithms work as a sociopath would if they were a human: attention – without compromise or compassion – is rewarded.

We've been blindsided by it. This machine slowly encompasses every bit of content that we put out into the world.

Whether it's an activist's tweet, politician's video or musician's piece. You're put through this filter that decides how far up the internet feed you appear.

Artists are encouraged to play it safe. There's a lot of dissonance between that and trying to put out honest, authentic music.

You also see people who are absolutely outrageous rewarded. And the best way to be outrageous is to be aggressive and divisive.

It's pretty wild. I think most people get to a point where they stop being a musician and become a media company.

It's an attention economy, which is the opposite of where I think creativity comes from in an artistic sense.



*I Can Hear the Birds, a four-track ambient EP written and recorded during the first few weeks of isolation. Artwork by Jethro Buck*

I do think that that's changed. There was an era where musicians were amongst the most influential storytellers in the world. It's not to say that we don't have any influence now, but it's not the same.

## Collaboration

There are loads of ways to collaborate. I produce, write or sing for other people. It's that artist's project and I'm with them to help them bring out what they're trying to do. That's such a joy for me. You never know how it will end up.

Sometimes there's a hint of a feeling, you follow it and then something quite profound comes out. Or sometimes, it's meaningless rubbish and you throw it away.

Every now and again something connects with you in the room and you take it out of the room and other people feel it too. That's like alchemy. I try not to decipher it too much.

The biggest thing I learned is that most of the time it doesn't work and that's fine. It just means you don't get a product, but the process is useful.

## Failure is part of the journey

You can get stuck in the daydream of what a piece could be. You never take that next step in case it doesn't end up being incredible. I broke my own heart so many times doing that.

Someone said it's like reaching into a black box. You can't see what's in there. You're feeling around and have a sense of the object. But you don't know what it looks like until you put your hand on it. You have to do the searching and the failing a lot before you find it.

*Good music comes from empathy and compassion. That's the whole point of telling a story. Yet in the online world it's all about number crunching and the sociopath algorithms will push compassion to the bottom of the feed.*

## Music communicates lived experience

As a teenager, a huge album for me was *Who is Jill Scott*. I learned so much about life from that record. As a 14-year-old boy in Oxford 3,500 miles away from Philadelphia, I had this internal collaboration with her and her music. That's a pretty amazing bit of communication.

Another example is how the black experience in the US was communicated through music for a long time. It was the most influential form of communication about that experience.

Think about the impact of NWA and Public Enemy in terms of showing people what was going on. It's pure narrative. It's also incredibly effective communication because young people heard it and fell in love with the music and the message.

A challenge within the music industry is that we have a very specific idea of success and failure. Monthly Spotify plays are a public scorecard. We're all on the same list, which is crazy, because we're not all the same.

As an artist, you have to assume that someone, somewhere will think you're crap and maybe try and put you down. But the sense of success and failure is also internal.

When decisions come my way now, I try to treat them in a different way to how I would have treated them five years ago.

It's a myth that things will go badly if you stick to your principles. Principles are such a valuable thing and will help you do well.

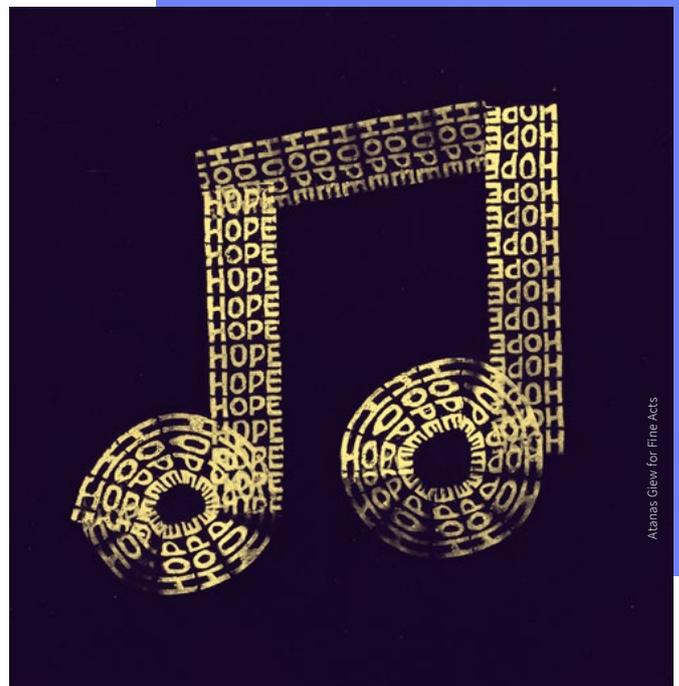
If you know what you believe in and how you are going to respond, you are going to do fine.

### Imagining our future

***For us to get out of the sticky situations that we're in, be it climate change or inequality, it's going to take imagining something that no one's imagined before. Something that you've never lived through.***

I see music getting less interesting as we've become more afraid of the future.

In the past musicians were like, 'check this out, this is what the future is going to sound like'. We should be encouraging musicians to make weird shit, and imagine some fresh crazy new music, because we need some crazy new ideas.



Atanas Glew for Fine Acts

From a psychological point of view, the more afraid you are, the harder it is to see the future. The more depressed you are, the harder it is to imagine your future. I know that from my own experience with depression. There were times I couldn't look more than a month ahead.

Right now, it feels revolutionary to be thinking: who do you want to be? What do you want your town to look like in five years? What do you want to see in the world? Don't ask the United Nations, ask yourself.

It's scary to open that door but wow, when you do it's powerful because the answer is right there.

I really believe that scientists are critical to analyse and implement the answer. But it will be the activists and artists who come up with the answers, because they are led by imagination first. They're imagining a better world, and they're fighting for it. ■

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# STORYTELLING

*'It was very obvious to them all that the story was about me. I wasn't sure... But working on the film I began to understand how important it was to put my life and experience into it. After a while I saw that it was the only way that people might really understand it.'*

**'THE FILMMAKER'**  
**Waad Al-Kateab**

A black and white portrait of Rachel Weidinger, a woman with long dark hair and bangs, wearing a green top. The portrait is centered at the top of the page. The background is a vibrant yellow with several teal-colored brushstroke-like shapes scattered around the portrait.

# the ARTIVIST at SCALE

—  
**Rachel  
Weidinger**

Rachel is program director for the Narrative Initiative in the US. She is an artist, researcher and organiser, using all three of those lenses to illustrate what is possible and to build patterns for broad, mutual survival. In 2011, Rachel founded Upwell, leading the development of big listening practices to shift narratives about the ocean.

**[Narrative change]**

*'An important thing about big listening is that it's not just about watching an individual brand or campaign. It's about looking at the issue at scale. That's the "big" part of big listening. It allows you to have a larger perspective. It's also a way to begin to think about new lenses for collaboration.'*

## Narrative change at scale

A lot of people are only able to create short-term change because those deep dominant narratives that we're working within just keep pushing back against our small incremental change.

In 1984, Sherrie Rabinowitz said that 'artists need to create on the same scale that society has the capacity to destroy'.

Figuring out how to create systems, narratives, visions, futures at that kind of scale is what I'm in constant pursuit of. I'll probably be pursuing it for the rest of my life.

I've also always been really interested in immersive world building. Whether that's fiction or movies or installations.

What does it mean to imagine a different kind of world to the one we live in now? What does it mean to create a vision of that?

## Narratives as survival systems

***I think of narratives and culture as being really important survival systems for people. There are power dynamics that are built into those systems and that make survival for some people easier than for others.***

Equity and social justice are paramount values in the Narrative Initiative's work. We look critically at dominant narratives that are out of line with these values and ask: ok, so this is the narrative we got to so far, but is this the dominant narrative we want to keep operating under?

Think about all of the assumptions you hold that are normal in the place and culture you

live in. For example, in the US with COVID-19 there's a narrative that you are responsible for your own safety, wellbeing and economic successes. The dominant narrative says: it's your individual responsibility whether you survive or not. In a highly contagious, deadly pandemic that's a big problem.

The systems that we have been handed are ineffective. Are these the systems, dominant narratives and cultures that we want to keep carrying forward?

I think of both narratives and culture as living things. So with every action and every choice, you're either keeping that thing alive or you're building in a new direction.

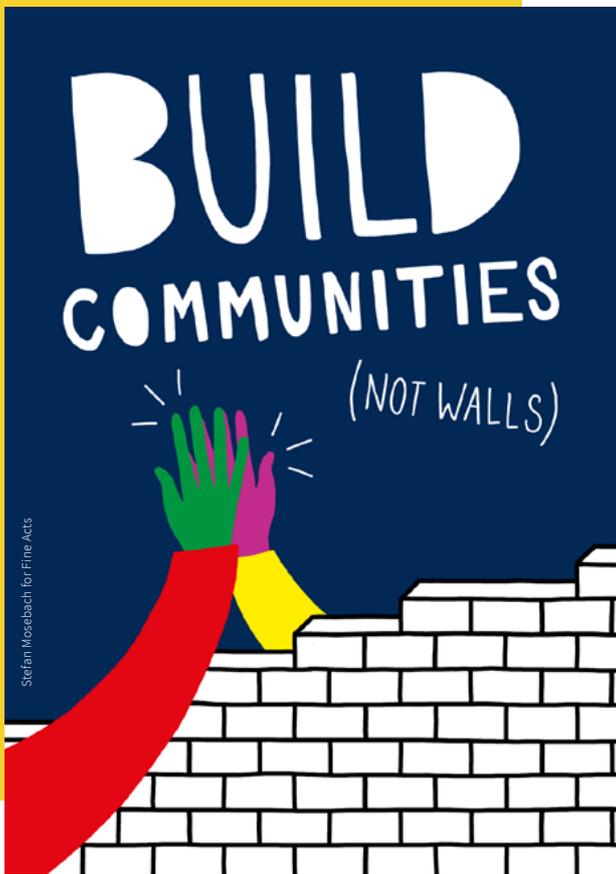
## The ocean's narrative

At Upwell I did a lot of research on people's ideas about the ocean. The overwhelming dominant narrative in the US was that oceans were really big and human behaviour didn't have an impact on them. They were scary, dangerous and had sharks in them, they were beautiful places to visit, but really it didn't matter what we did to the ocean.

When this work started in 2011, there was a lot of research coming online about ocean acidification and we could see large-scale impacts of human behaviour on the ocean.

So, the narrative we thought about shifting was from 'human behaviour has no impact' to 'human behaviour has significant impact'.

The worldview of the ocean was changing at that time, and that's the scale of narrative shift that I think it's important to think about and work on.



## Big listening

One of the ways I did this work, beginning at TechSoup and then at Upwell, is something that came to be called big listening.

Big listening is monitoring online conversations and public speech in real time. Using tools that corporations use to monitor their brands.

So, if you think about the ocean as having a brand, what are the ocean's product lines? What are its competitor brands?

***Shifting the entire conversation around the ocean feels impossible. But if you think about shifting the conversation about sharks first – we did work around Shark Week with the Discovery Channel. Then you think about shifting the conversation around ocean acidification. Then on over-fishing, and so on.***

## Artistic collaboration

Five years ago, I *finally* stumbled into the field of social practice art. I usually describe it as doing art with people.

Art gives me some of the tools for being critical in how I involve collaboration in my work. For example, the degree of agency afforded to collaborators, how privilege shows up, or what it means to undertake really massive creative acts in a collaborative way.

When its work at scale, it's important to not self-isolate. You have to think of yourself as actively part of a team and keep articulating the theories you are bringing to your work.

## Operationalising narrative work at scale

An important part of this work is to help people imagine working at this bigger scale and then to operationalise it.

There's a beautiful collaboration in Minnesota of 22 organisations, called [Our Minnesota Future](#), that the Narrative Initiative partnered with.

They had already worked together to articulate three shared values. That felt like a really big deal to me and a very beautiful way of working.

They had their three shared values and wanted to put them to work to allow larger scale collaboration as a coalition.

Doing narrative change work and operationalising these values across the coalition was more complex in practice.

I started to see that there are different kinds of capacities that are necessary to do narrative change work.

Four baskets of necessary capacities emerged:

- 1. Create** – first you have to create the new narrative you are shifting to.
- 2. Translate** – then you have to translate it, imagining that narrative being held by many voices.
- 3. Deploy** – third is distributing it, and we've got loads of tools for this, it's something that mass media and capitalist marketing are great at.
- 4. Observe together** – finally, you have to be able to watch the way the narrative moves in the world.

There are a lot of ways to fill those four baskets, depending on the resources you have.

You can spend 100,000 dollars a year on a corporate social media monitoring platform and salaries, or you can use everybody in your coalition to help sense how the narrative might be changing.

There is no one recipe for doing these things. But it's a framework for self-assessment to see what capacities you're filling, and which you need.

## Other lessons for collaboration

### **Collective sensemaking**

**As an individual person or organisation, it's really hard to hold all of the information and power you need to understand the scale of a current narrative, let alone change it.**

**This understanding requires a really intense kind of sensemaking. It's a collective gathering and interpretation of information, so a group can build a shared understanding of the situation and begin to shift it.**

### **Collaboration through big listening**

An important thing about big listening is that it's not just about watching an individual brand or campaign. It's about looking at the issue at scale.

That's the 'big' part of big listening. It allows you to have a larger perspective.

Big listening is also a way to begin to think about new lenses for collaboration.

### **Collaboration through networks**

Another lens for working together is distributed networks.

Distributed campaigning for distributed narrative change strategies is more possible when many organisations, individuals and influencers can work together on a big narrative push.

## Is narrative change an emergent field?

We are really adamant that narrative change is not new.

Individuals and organisations have long explored ways to shift narratives and build culture. And thinking about our relationships and responsibilities to each other have been around us as long as language.

There has been a shift in what kinds of information are accessible.

Tools like big listening allow for large scale analysis of public opinion and sentiment. We can watch narratives changing at a scale that wasn't possible previously.

The scale of media culture and news cycles has really shifted too, and a lot of pressure has come from that. There's this feeling that everything is shifting all the time.

There's a hunger for magic bullets in narrative change practice, new tech hacks to win the kinds of futures that we envision.



***In my experience you can shift narrative, but it involves a huge amount of elbow grease. It's not easy, and that's ok. We don't want to be able to just flip human survival systems without considered effort. But they definitely need shifting if we're going to make equity and justice common sense.***

The survival systems we built don't always serve most of us. These survival systems and power structures are built to make it easy for *some* slices of the population to survive. A lot of this being actively questioned in this time of COVID-19. ■

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# COLLABORATION

*'You have to compromise. And it's not be easy. Sometimes the message is not be as sharp or radical as you want. Sometimes it's still worth doing it... Because at least the core of the message is being delivered to people who otherwise wouldn't access it.'*

**'THE DATA ACTIVIST'**  
**Renata Ávila**



# the NARRATIVE CHANGE FUNDER

—  
**Brett Davidson**

**[Philanthropy]**

Brett is director of the Media and Narratives Division at the Open Society Public Health Program, where he works to change long-held social narratives that impact public health. His entry point into narrative work was as a radio journalist and producer in South Africa. From there he began working with non-profits, supporting them with story-telling and media related advocacy. Now he looks at the narrative system and how it holds ideas and power in place.

***‘[Narrative change] is very connected with power. This work is not just about playing with language; narratives embody and justify certain power relationships.’***

## How did you get into narrative change work?

I used to work as a radio journalist, where I realised that the really powerful moments were when people told their own stories. They were real and full of emotion – genuine human experiences.

When I started working in human rights and social justice, I realised that one of the main challenges was helping people understand one another as human beings, beyond labels and stereotypes. And one powerful way to do that was helping people tell their stories, and have them listened to.

But over the past few years, storytelling has become touted as a bit of a ‘cure all’. There’s a lot of advice out there on ‘telling your story to change the world’.

It’s not nearly as simple as that. Storytelling is complicated. And there are dangers in people telling their own stories, exposing them to potential harm. So, you do have to think carefully about personal storytelling.

***I went on to realise that beyond individual stories, there are larger narratives society tells about certain issues and types of people. We all have assumptions about how the world works and these are embodied in social and cultural narratives.***

***How do we change those? How do we create new narratives as societies and as cultures?***

***Rather than using storytelling as a tactic, I’m now more involved in thinking about narrative as a strategy.***

I started reading and thinking about the idea of narrative power: that social narratives help

to legitimise existing power relationships, prop them up, make them seem natural.

So, in addition to all of the other approaches we are used to using to shift power (through the law, mobilising people and so on), how do we also engage at the narrative level, to de-naturalise and thus destabilise existing power relationships?

For example, in public health that means looking at health as a political issue. There are certain power dynamics and assumptions about who deserves access to healthcare, who is in and who is out. Many times, this translates quite literally into who gets to live and who gets to die. How do we change those narratives to ensure that everyone has social justice and the right to health?

## What is a narrative and what is narrative change?

I think it was Ryan Senser who said ‘a narrative is a story we already know and believe to be true.’

When explaining what narrative is, I love to use as an example an extract from the TV series ‘Game of Thrones’. There’s this scene where one of the characters, Khaleesi, is talking to her handmaidens and one says, ‘the moon is an egg’, and the other one says, ‘no, the moon is a goddess, it is known.’

And to me that phrase ‘it is known’ encapsulates what a narrative is. It’s the story we tell one another about how the world works. It’s that underlying assumption we have and don’t question.

To me, narrative change is about becoming aware of those assumptions, and then trying to shift them.

It's very connected with power. This work is not just about playing with language or words. Narratives embody and justify certain power relationships.

I started writing about narrative change two or three years ago, because everyone was talking about it as if it was the new silver bullet for everything, but no one really knew what it meant.

We need to be more specific in what we are talking about and have concrete theories of change. It's certainly not the answer to everything, and it's difficult to do well.

I do think that we have started to see more rigorous definitions of narrative change appearing – as well as more sophisticated theories of change.

### How do you work on narrative change?

I've characterised the narrative change work we do into three approaches: first, storytelling and listening.

Second, working with culture – creative activism, artistic activism, working with popular culture. The work of groups like the [Pop Culture Collaborative](#) or the [Center for Artistic Activism](#) in the US.

The third area is cognitive and linguistic science. People like [Anat Shenker-Osorio](#), or the [FrameWorks Institute](#), who bring together different types of experts like anthropologists and cognitive scientists.

At the Open Society Foundations we fund organisations and movements who do this work. We also provide resources for civil society groups who see the need to work at the narrative level but don't necessarily have the expertise or experience.



We use our convening power to bring various groups together to learn from one another and strategically share knowledge.

For example, we funded the [FrameWorks Institute](#) to do research in Kenya on narratives around healthcare privatisation, working in partnership with a Kenyan group called [Long View Consult](#). Long View had greater knowledge of the Kenyan context, while [FrameWorks](#) brought their research methodology. These kinds of knowledge-sharing collaborations are important for narrative work.

Sometimes we also fund specific narrative and audience research, which many groups can then use.

### What are examples of narratives undermining civil society work?

One example is the narrative that the private sector is more effective and efficient than governments or the public sector. We see this in action all over the world – people turning to private sector solutions because

government hasn't delivered healthcare or education, for example.

We've tried to push back against that narrative. In fact, there are many examples and places where privatisation of healthcare or education has led to worse outcomes.

We believe that rather than giving up on government, we should work to hold government to account and make sure it works for us. Because that's what democracy really is.

In public health, there's a difficult narrative around individual responsibility – blaming individuals or groups for their own poor health issues. How do we change the narrative to look at systemic issues rather than individualised blame and solutions?

One of the tricky issues we grapple with is how to change a particular narrative without undermining other narratives you want to support. For example, how do you challenge corruption without undermining faith in government and maintain the idea that government can work for us?

### How can civil society challenge this?

If we're all trying to do this alone, in silos, we're not going to achieve much. Unless we all start working together on the deeper narratives, we aren't going to make much progress.

And so, one of the challenges facing us is how we move out of our issue areas and collaborate on shifting these fundamental or meta-narratives.

That's a big challenge because each organisation has an incentive to promote itself to operate in its own area. As funders

we also operate according to certain issue areas and topics that we fund.

### What are examples of potential connector narratives?

Racism is an enormous one. The challenge of racism and the meta-narratives around who belongs and who doesn't.

Another fundamental challenge is that in our neo-liberal context, there's a tendency to talk about everything in economic terms. People are valued according to what they bring to the economy, rather than their inherent value as human beings.

The public-private issue is another big one. There's an increasing encroachment of private sector in every aspect of life. How do we rejuvenate the idea of us as the public and of the value of public goods?

A huge issue today is artificial intelligence. We see evidence that biased narratives and assumptions about groups of people are being encoded in algorithms. And they then appear to be natural or neutral because it's in computer code.

It becomes this huge black box that no one understands except the people who own the code. And how do we challenge that?

The documentary *Coded Bias*, which premiered at Sundance, looks at this issue in depth. It's definitely something we are concerned about in the health field. Apps and software are being used to make decisions about who gets what kind of healthcare.

But again, this is a crosscutting issue impacting criminal justice, education, housing – almost every area of our lives. ■

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# IMAGINING Futures

*'We are at such an insane critical moment as humanity and what's required for us to survive are ideas and beliefs that go way beyond what we're told the future has to hold. ... I want to spend some time writing about alternative places, to where we could all be going.'*

**'THE WRITER'**  
**Kuchenga Shenje**

*'For us to get out of the sticky situations that we're in, be it climate change or inequality, it's going to take imagining something that no one's imagined before. Something that you've never lived through.'*

**'THE SYMPHONIC STORYTELLER'**  
**Orlando Higginbottom**

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